Luciano Garibaldi

THE ENGLISH LEAD
Who killed Mussolini and Petacci?

with the essay
THE ENGLISH TRAIL
SEEN FROM DARK SHOPS
by Massimo Caprara

INTRODUCTION

Almost sixty years later, the truth about the end of Benito Mussolini and Garetta Petacci is still unknown. Their deaths mark the beginning of the great mysteries of the Republic, just as the disappearance of the "treasure of Dongo" represents the first episode of the immense Italian Tangentopoli scandal. According to the version provided by the Communist Party long after the events (why not immediately?), the dictator and his mistress were 'executed' by 'Colonel Valerio' (accountant Walter Audisio, from Alessandria, an obscure party *apparatchik*) on the afternoon of April 28, 1945, shortly after 4 p.m., in front of the gate of Villa Belmonte, in Giulino di Mezzegra, Municipality of Tremezzina, on Lake Como. This is the "vulgate" - as defined by Renzo De Felice, who did not consider it reliable - that our children still study in school today, in books written mostly by left-wing historians. According to this version, "Valerio" presented himself to the two condemned men, who had been taken prisoner to the home of the De Maria family (friends of the partisans), pretending to be a fascist who had come to free them. Using blunt and rude manners, he addressed both Mussolini and Petacci informally ("Hurry up! Hurry up!' he allegedly ordered the woman. 'But I'm not wearing any panties!' she replied. "Pull them off, don't think about it!" the "executioner" would have replied vulgarly), he would have pushed them outside, where his men were waiting, ready to form the "firing squad." Mussolini, portrayed as a half-wit, would have replied, beaming: "I'll give you an empire."

Apart from the obvious aim of demonizing, or rather "criminalizing," the enemy (according to Lenin's lesson: "The enemy must first be eliminated physically and then morally"), this reconstruction was disproved by the autopsy on Mussolini's body, performed by Professor Caio Mario Cattabeni at the Milan morgue on the afternoon of April 29, after the bodies had been displayed in Piazzale Loreto. The examination revealed that Mussolini's stomach contained no traces of food, while the official account reported that, around 1 p.m., three hours before their death, the two condemned men had eaten lunch (polenta, salami, milk, fruit, bread). No autopsy was performed on Petacci: it would have revealed that her death was caused by two 9mm bullets, as was discovered in 1957, when Garetta's remains were exhumed. How was this possible, if 'Valerio' had fired a 7.65 caliber Mas submachine gun? The 9mm caliber was that of the Colts also used by British Special Force agents.

In total, there are twenty-two inaccuracies and outright falsehoods in the communist version: they have been verified and

exposed, one by one, by Alessandro Zanella, author of the book *L'ora di Dongo* (Milan, 1993), in which the killing of Mussolini and Garetta is attributed to 'Captain Neri', a communist partisan who, for having acted on his own initiative, was allegedly murdered a few days later by his own comrades. Before Zanella, another great "Dongo expert," Franco Bandini, had supported and demonstrated, in his *Vita e morte segreta di Mussolini* (*Mussolini's* Secret Life and Death, Milan, 1978), the theory of the "double execution": actual killing in the morning, shooting of two corpses in the afternoon. According to 'Bill' (Urbano Lazzaro, the partisan who captured Mussolini), author of the book *Dongo, mezzo secolo di menzogne* (Dongo, Half a Century of Lies) (Milan, 1993), the double murder was carried out, again on the morning of the 28th, by Luigi Longo, number two in the PCI. Again
in the morning, but for despicable reasons (an attempted rape of Claretta Petacci), the drama is placed by the journalist and historian who has dedicated practically his entire life to searching for the truth about the death of the Duce: Giorgio Pisano in his *Gli ultimi 5 secondi di Mussolini* (Mussolini's Last 5 Seconds) (Milan, 1996).
As can be seen, the truth can have many faces. This book—which is essentially a journalistic investigation in several installments, and for this reason contains no notes—offers a completely surprising one.

Luciano Garibaldi*

* Since this book is based on all existing historiography concerning the end of Benito Mussolini and Claretta Petacci, it contains numerous quotations. Any comments or clarifications by the author included in these quotations are always indicated in square brackets [...].

DEATH WITHOUT CONVICTION

Louis XVI was tried and sentenced to death in a solemn procedure before Parliament, in the presence of dozens of journalists. He had his defense attorneys, the best criminal lawyers of the Paris Bar, who were able to deliver their closing arguments freely. Each deputy was called by name to vote. The sentence (guillotine) was carried out on January 21, 1793—as they *say—coram populo,* before all the people of Paris.

Thomas Moore, known to us Italians as Tommaso Moro, prime minister of King Edward VI of England, was tried for treason before the High Court of Justice, and the majority voted for his conviction: he had refused to adhere to the new Anglican religion and to recognize the sovereign as its head. He was beheaded in front of all of London on July 6, 1535.

Was Benito Mussolini, prime minister for 21 years of the King of Italy, then, for 18 months, head of the RSI (Italian Social Republic), the short-lived state of northern Italy occupied militarily by the German army, tried? Was he sentenced to death? By whom? When? For what crime? And was the sentence also carried out publicly? *Coram populo?* Where? By whom? At what time? Is there an official report on his execution? Who wrote it? Where is it? In the State Archives?

There is no single answer to any of these questions. This is reason enough to attempt to reconstruct, as completely as possible, the story of the

death sentence of the leader of fascism. Let's try to do so by calling on all the protagonists: the political and military leaders of the Resistance, the 'official' historians of the Liberation, the most popular journalist-historians who investigated the Duce's sentence, and the great foreign historians.

There are two "official" historians whose works have always been referenced by both authors of history books and journalists-historians who do not belong to the group of so-called "revisionists." They are Roberto Battaglia and Franco Catalano. Roberto Battaglia is the author of *Storia della Resistenza italiana (History of the Italian Resistance),* Einaudi, 1964, a text considered by many to be "sacred." On page 643, we read: "On the morning of April 25, 1945, the CLNAI (National Liberation Committee of Northern Italy) issued three fundamental decrees that sealed its legislative work. [...] The second decree concerns the administration of justice. Article 1 reads: 'Members of the Fascist government and Fascist leaders guilty of contributing to the suppression of constitutional guarantees, destroying popular freedoms, creating the Fascist regime, compromising and betraying the fate of the country, and leading it to the current catastrophe, shall be punished with the death penalty and, in less serious cases, with life imprisonment'. It is implicit," comments Battaglia, "if such an obvious thing can be said to be implicit, that Mussolini will be sentenced to death."

So much for Battaglia. However, reading the second of the sacred texts on the Resistance, Franco Catalano's *Storia del Clnai* (Bompiani publisher, 1956), we learn that that article was not Article 1, but Article 5 of the second paragraph. One might say: subtleties. Certainly, subtleties. And yet, what is the exact historical truth? Catalano reports the *Decree on Justice* in its entirety. It is a very detailed document, which occupies 12 dense pages of the book and describes in minute detail how the famous 'Cas' (the

Extraordinary Assize Courts), the 'Cap' (People's Assize Courts), the 'Justice Commissions', the 'War Tribunals', and so on: all institutions not provided for either by the Statute or by laws enacted by the Bonomi Government.

The decree then describes how to identify a fascist, who is and who is not one, how to gather information about him in order to capture him if he is in hiding, putting pressure on relatives and acquaintances, and how to shoot the convicted person immediately without giving him any chance to appeal.

We cannot conclude the section reserved for 'official' historians without mentioning Claudio Pavone's much-cited *Una guerra civile* (A Civil War), Bollati-Boringhieri 1991, in which Mussolini's death sentence is included in the chapter entitled *La violenza insurrezionale (Insurrectional Violence).* 'We were about to experience one of those moments,' writes Pavone, 'in which the end of the nightmare of death, in order to be truly felt as definitive, still required, exceptionally, more deaths'. "Wise," writes Pavone, was the order given by the Piedmont Region military

command: "Only swift and exemplary justice will prevent, on the one hand, excessive bloodshed and, on the other, undeserved impunity." That command decreed the death sentence for all those who wore a RSI uniform, except for young conscripts. But really everyone. Not only the GNR (National Republican Guard) and the Black Brigades, not only the Decima Mas and the Muti Legion, but even members of the port, railway, and traffic police. A death sentence for 350,000 people, which was not carried out only because it was overturned by the 'higher authority', namely the CLNAI, which intervened to mitigate the measure: only those who refused to surrender their weapons were to be shot.
As for Mussolini's sentence, Pavone writes: 'The episode that symbolically sums up the violence of those days was the shooting of Mussolini. [...] Its legality derives from the complex institutional system that governed the last phase of the Resistance and then the insurrection. Without going too far back, on April 12, 1945, the CLNAI had denounced Mussolini and the members of the Fascist directorate as 'traitors to the homeland and war criminals' and ordered their capture. Once the execution had taken place, the CLNAI fully endorsed it. Unlike France and England, Italy did not have regicides in its history as a watershed between opposing eras. The last to arrive in this field, Italy had, in the middle of the 20th century, the execution of the Duce.
Regarding the legitimacy of the sentence and its execution, it is interesting to recall the chilling comment by *l'Unità,* reported in these terms by Pavone himself on page 514 of his book: "The Pei newspaper," writes Pavone, "exalted 'the historical importance of the fact that the major war criminals were executed in Jacobin style, with an act of popular justice that is the inevitable corollary of the insurrection,' while the display of the corpses was dismissed by the communist newspaper with a brief and contemptuous news item: 'The carcass of the Duce of evildoers, surrounded by a good number of his acolytes, lies in Piazzale Loreto, exposed to public ridicule.'

But Roosevelt wanted the "Chief Devil" for himself

Four great foreign historians have devoted their attention to Mussolini's death sentence. They are Denis Mack-Smith, William Deakin, Martin Gilbert, and Richard Collier. As fate would have it, all four are British, all four are famous professors of contemporary history at Oxford or Cambridge. Let's start with William Deakin, who is also the best known and most authoritative, since his book, *History of the Republic of Salò,* published in Italy by Einaudi in 1963, has been rewritten by entire legions of Italian historians. Deakin is laconic, but not apologetic.

, published in Italy by Einaudi in 1963, has been referenced by legions of Italian historians. Deakin is laconic, but not apologetic. For him, Mussolini's death sentence was not a legal action. But let's hear him out: "The terms of Mussolini's sentence, the responsibility of individuals, or the details of his death are of little interest. Nor does the controversy in Resistance circles over the formal legality of his execution or who gave the orders matter much. Mussolini died as a result of revolutionary action. He was transferred from the custody of the local partisans who had captured him in Dongo to that of a firing squad under the orders of the Milanese Resistance and was shot without warning at the gate of a villa on the outskirts of Mezzagra [written this way, instead of Mezzegra]." That's all: after 794 densely packed pages of the most minute details about every move, every word, every thought of Mussolini.
When Denis Mack-Smith, in his *Mussolini* (Rizzoli, 1983), here is what we found on page 513: "In the event of Mussolini's capture by the partisans, the leaders of the Resistance had ordered that he be immediately executed. [...] The members of the CLNAI had confirmed the decision to execute him, and it seems that later, on that same day of April 25, he learned of it. Alleged eyewitnesses have recounted what happened in several different ways. The only certain fact is that on April 28, 1945, the 61-year-old Mussolini was hastily shot by communist partisans before the Americans, now only a few hours away, could reach him."
Gilbert Martin, a renowned professor at Oxford, is the author of *Second World War,* translated into Italian in 1990 by Mondadori as *La grande storia della seconda guerra mondiale (The Great History of World War II).* Let us read how Mussolini's death deserves to be handed down to history: 'In Italy, April 28 saw the ignominious end of fascist regime established 23 years earlier: on that day, near the village of Dongo, on Lake Como, Mussolini was executed by Italian partisans who, in retaliation for the killing of 15 comrades in Milan nine months earlier, shot another 15 people captured with him. Among them were Alessandro Pavolini, secretary of the Fascist Party, four cabinet ministers, and some of Mussolini's friends. His mistress, Garetta Petacci, was also killed. Her body and Mussolini's were taken to Milan and hung upside down on the morning of April 29. That's all. We looked in the index

of names: there is no Pertini and no Valiani. Neither Longo nor Togliatti. Nor is there any mention of the lieutenant of the Kingdom, Umberto di Savoia, who was also the head of state where Mussolini and his followers were killed. There is only a reference to Ferruccio Parri on page 743 as 'a member of the Resistance freed in Switzerland by General Wolff'. Nothing else is mentioned about the end of fascism in a book of global scope.

More compelling, more fictionalized, more "cinematic" is Richard Collier's reconstruction in his *Duce, Duce!,* Mursia, 1971. 'From a small village south of Naples, Officer Alberto Materazzi, of the operations office at Allied headquarters, sent instructions to the 25 teams of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) already ready for action in the woods and mountains: "In accordance with orders from Allied headquarters, it is the Allies' wish to capture Mussolini alive. Notify this headquarters if he has been captured, and keep him under protection until the arrival of Allied troops.' [...] But the Communists' instructions had been issued a few hours after those of the Allies, and they were unequivocal. The insurrection was to go ahead despite the Allies' orders. Luigi Longo immediately issued the order: "No safe passage, no golden bridge for the fleeing enemy, but a war of extermination." Other members of the left also saw the need to demonstrate that they were no longer dependent on the Allies, but were their equals. The socialist Sandro Pertini commented: "We are not their servants: killing Mussolini will be asserting that we are their equals." of the left also saw the need to demonstrate that they no longer depended on the Allies, but were their equals. The socialist Sandro Pertini commented: "We are not their servants: killing Mussolini will assert our independence." Anyone who had participated in the March on Rome in 1922 would be judged by a people's court, whose sentence, in the case of the Duce and the bigwigs, would be the death penalty. This was the position of the Communist leaders, and the others could only follow suit.

And the Allies? The victors? "Franklin Delano Roosevelt [the American president]," writes Richard Collier, "had begun the search for Mussolini as early as July 26, 1943, with a memorandum to Winston Churchill suggesting that, in the event of a separate peace with Italy, 'the 'Chief Devil' must be handed over'. Churchill agreed, provided that no significant military advantage was sacrificed for immediate revenge. Otherwise, he was personally indifferent to Mussolini's fate."

And finally, here is Collier's vivid account of the meeting between Walter Audisio, accompanied by Aldo Lampredi, and General Cadorna, and the confirmation that the latter agreed with the communists: "'I have an order from the Insurrectional Committee, General,' said Audisio, 'we are going to shoot Mussolini. 'Do you have a written order?' asked Cadorna. Silently, the two men shook their heads. Cadorna remained silent. Lampredi, interpreting the silence as assent, began to list what they needed: means of transport, passes, armed men. General Cadorna racked his brains: he was in no position to take the time to check that each of the members of the CLNAI had actually given their consent to the death sentence. Moreover, he knew perfectly well that the communists held the highest cards in the game. During a recent meeting...

« VIMFRCATE))

, they had mocked him: "What do you want to preside over?" they had taunted him, "you don't preside over anything." It was one o'clock in the morning, and the fate of a city was at stake. He lost his patience. With a sudden gesture of anger, he exclaimed, "Yes, kill him!" Shortly afterwards, General Emilio Faldella entered: "What's going on? Where are they going?" Cadorna replied, perfectly calm: "They've captured Mussolini. They're going to pick him up." He said no more. Not for a moment did it cross General Faldella's mind that Mussolini might not be taken alive. He telephoned the director of the San Vittore prison and asked him to prepare twenty cells to accommodate the Duce and his senior officials.

The opinion of Italian historical journalists

The most meticulous and compelling reconstruction of the Duce's death sentence is the work of a journalist who died prematurely, Gian Franco Vené, who in 1973 published a book entitled *La condanna di Mussolini* (The Condemnation of Mussolini) with Fabbri. Vené recounts that at 8 a.m. on April 25, in Milan, at the Salesian college in Via Copernico, "five rain-soaked men quickly crossed the cloister portico and entered the cold, semi-dark library. Priests in cassocks guarded the entrance. The five men were Arpesani, Marazza, Pertini, Sereni, and Valiani. Thus began the most decisive meeting of the CLNAI. In the Salesian library, the three representatives of the left (Pertini, Valiani, and

Sereni) had little trouble getting the first decree, entitled *All Powers to the CLNAI,* approved. The second decree proposed and discussed concerned the administration of justice. It stated: "The members of the fascist government and the fascist hierarchy guilty of contributing to the suppression of constitutional guarantees, of destroying popular freedoms, of creating the fascist regime, of compromising and betraying the fate of the country, and of leading it to the current catastrophe, shall be punished with the penalty of life imprisonment.

constitutional guarantees, destroying popular freedoms, creating the fascist regime, compromising and betraying the fate of the country, and leading it to the current catastrophe, shall be punished with the death penalty and, in less serious cases, with life imprisonment." Valiani, Sereni, and Pertini raised their eyes and eyebrows. No one had mentioned Mussolini by name, but it was obvious to everyone that Mussolini was the first to be executed. It was not yet 9 a.m. on April 25, Mussolini was free, but his death sentence had already been pronounced.

Vené does not say who voted for and who voted against. He only writes: "The decree was passed by a majority vote." Shortly afterwards, however, he adds: "Marazza and the liberal Arpesani also signed, at the end of the meeting, the insurrectionary proclamation that Longo, on behalf of the PEI, had already issued 24 hours earlier."

It can be inferred that, in the opinion of the journalist-historian, Marazza and Arpesani did not sign. Moreover, the two never wanted to specify what they had voted or not voted that morning, faithful to the instruction not to create rifts and divisions within the CLNAI. In any case, they signed the communiqué of April 29, in which, after the executions had taken place, the CLNAI assumed full responsibility not only for the killing of Mussolini, but also for that of the hierarchs and the murder of Garetta Petacci.

The dramatic and vivid account by Gian Franco Vené of Pertini's role in the so-called negotiations that took place at the Archbishop's Palace, in the presence of Cardinal Schuster, between Mussolini and some representatives of the CLNAI, cannot be overlooked: "Sandro Pertini could not contain his anger. He was overcome by the suspicion that the moderates Marazza and Arpesani would be deceived by Mussolini and would agree to promise to spare his life. He hastily concluded the speech he was giving to the Borletti workers, jumped up, and

car and, honking the horn like a madman, drove to the Archbishop's Palace. On the stairs, he bumped into a small group of men who were coming down, gesticulating. He didn't even look them in the face. Among them was Mussolini. "You let him get away!" he hissed, slapping his forehead: "And I'm such an idiot for not recognizing him!""Why, what did you want to do?" "Kill him right there, with my gun, on the stairs!" Valiani and Sereni, who arrived at the Archbishop's Palace shortly after Pertini, were calmer, but only on the surface. They realized that it had been a mistake to leave the initiative for the meeting to the moderates Marazza and Arpesani. If Mussolini had kept his word, if he had returned by 8 o'clock, the Democrats and Liberals could have laid down the law. Marazza, standing in the center of the room, confronted Pertini: "If Mussolini surrenders, we must keep our word: hand him over to the Americans! We are not murderers!" "We have only one word: summary justice!" thundered Pertini. Prefect Tiengo entered the smoke-filled antechamber and approached Marazza, but no one paid any attention to him. Pertini sneered furiously: "If Mussolini returns, there is only one thing to do: shoot him! Tonight!" Prefect Tiengo moved his lips to speak, but said nothing. He slipped away and ran to the Prefecture: "They want to shoot the Duce... shoot him tonight!"

The iron will of the leaders of the left to get rid of Mussolini, by any means necessary, is reconfirmed by the famous episode of the American telegrams. Here is how it is recounted, again, by Gian Franco Vené: "On the evening of the 27th, several radio messages sent from the Allied headquarters in Siena arrived at the CVL headquarters in Via del Carmine. Each of these messages passed from table to table: 'To General Command *and* CLNAI - *stop* - let us know Mussolini's exact situation - *stop* - we will send a plane to pick him up - *stop* - Allied Headquarters'. 'To CVL *and* CLNAI - *stop* - plane to pick up Mussolini will land at 6 p.m. tomorrow at Bresso airport - *stop* - prepare

landing signals - *stop* - Allied Headquarters." And again: "To CLNAI - *stop* - Allied Command desires immediate information on Mussolini's presumed location, I say Mussolini - *stop* - if *he* has been captured, he is to be detained for immediate delivery to Allied Command - *stop* - you are requested to bring this information *to* the partisan formations that carried out the capture with absolute priority." And finally: "For Clnai, I say Clnai - *stop* - XV Army Group wishes to bring Mussolini *et* Oraziani, I say Mussolini *et* Oraziani, *to* Allied Command headquarters - *stop."* At 11 p.m., Pertini, Sereni, and Longo arrived in Via del Carmine. With the Allied Headquarters phonograms lying on the tables, they only had to decide "who" would go and kill Mussolini. Pertini made the proposal to Italo Pietra. Pietra replied that it was the job of the police. Luchino Dal Verme replied the same. Then Pertini pointed his finger at Walter Audisio:

"You represent the military police!". "Valerio" simply said, "Yes." Shortly thereafter, even before Valerio moved toward Dongo, the CVL general command sent a phonogram reply to Allied headquarters: "Sorry we cannot deliver Mussolini, who was tried by a people's court and shot in the same place where fifteen patriots were previously shot by Nazi-Fascists - stop."

This is the main evidence that the order was to take Mussolini to Piazzale Loreto and shoot him there. Something went wrong. But the communists never wanted to say what.

Giorgio Bocca, in his authoritative *Storia dell'Italia partigiana* (History of Partisan Italy, the most recent edition, published by Mondadori, is from 1995), highlights the rebuke made by the CLNAI to the CMRP (Piedmont Regional Military Command), which wanted to execute no less than 350,000 fascists: "With regard to the orders to shoot all those who took up arms against the Fatherland, we would point out that these do not correspond
with the position we have taken on this issue, which is specified in the following directive: those who surrender must have their lives spared, unless they are guilty of specific crimes. Any fascist captured with weapons must be shot."

As for Mussolini, Bocca writes on page 507: "It was the CLNAI that signed the death sentence of Mussolini and his henchmen, denouncing the members of the fascist leadership as war criminals. The CLNAI met at 8:30 a.m. on April 25 at the Salesian college in Milan, from where it issued the three fundamental decrees of its legislative work: *All powers to the CLNAI,* proclaims the first. *For the administration of justice,* dictates the second, in which, in Article 5, the certain death sentence of Mussolini and the top leaders is reiterated. The implicit death sentence for Mussolini did not mean his immediate execution. Popular fury had not yet risen, and a trial was still being considered. Riccardo Lombardi had prepared accommodation for the virtual prisoner in Piazza Diaz and a partisan guard "with nerves of steel." But [...] the news of Mussolini's capture reached Milan while the insurrection was raging and the first bloody operation was underway, leading to a single revolutionary solution: the CLN and the CVL pronounced the death sentence, to be carried out immediately. A partisan unit commanded by Walter Audisio reached the lake and shot the leaders in Dongo, and Mussolini and Petacci near Giulino di Mezzegra.

Severo ed essenziale, sul punto, il documentatissimo Silvio Bertoldi, che così riferisce a pagina 372 del suo *Salò* (Rizzoli, 1976): "They were condemned by the executor of high justice, Colonel Valerio. Probably, if they had been tried by a civil or military court, no more than two or three of them would have been sent before a firing squad."

And here is Arrigo Petacco's version, in his *Pavolini,* Mondadori, 1998: "In Dongo, there are 15 prisoners in total. Of them, only Pavolini, Porta, and Zerbino are identified as 'traitors'—and therefore liable to immediate execution—according to the CLN order of April 12, 1945. But when the time comes, Colonel Valerio and his men will not be so particular."

Before the historical journalists just mentioned, a great master of historical journalism, Paolo Monelli, had written at length about the mystery of Mussolini's death sentence. He did so in his *Mussolini piccolo borghese (*Mussolini*, the petty bourgeois),* written for Garzanti in 1950. A text that was too quickly consigned to the attic, perhaps because of some of his scathing judgments, such as the one on page 368: "It is not advisable to place much faith in what Colonel Valerio has written in his numerous reports and writings, all of which are different and contradictory." Monelli devotes eight pages to criticizing the "vulgate" on Mussolini's death. He knows so little about the circumstances in which the "death sentence" of the fascist dictator was pronounced that nothing can be found in his pages about this obscure detail (which, incidentally, came to light thanks to the works of Battaglia and Catalano, all published after his book). And this was in 1950, a good 40 years before the so-called "revisionist" sortie of the historian Renzo De Felice.

It is worth noting Monelli's most significant statements: 'Colonel Valerio (accountant Walter Audisio), who has always claimed to have reserved the role of "executioner" for himself, has given at least three different and sometimes conflicting versions of his and others' actions. Was Colonel Valerio the sole executioner? This is what the official documents of the Communist Party say, and this is the officially accepted version. But I must say that the partisan Sandrino (Guglielmo Cantoni) gave a completely different account of the scene. According to Sandrino's account, there was no reading of the sentence or anything similar. It was a hasty execution, carried out
before Mussolini and Petacci even reached the wall, on which no bullet marks were found.

"The conclusion that I think we can reach," Monelli writes, "is as follows. The accounts of the very few eyewitnesses contradict each other, and there is no evidence to believe one more than the other. The detail of the reading of a sentence serves to give legal cover to the murder; the lengthy description of Mussolini's fearful behavior corresponds

to the communists' desire to make the tyrant's end appear more obscene and grotesque than is likely. When the leaders of the Communist Party realized that it was no longer possible to keep the details of the killing secret, they decided to make Audisio the sole hero of the enterprise. Audisio was placed on the Communist Party's electoral list and elected to Parliament on no other merit."
These words, so plain and calm, sound terrible in reality, more than half a century after they were written. It is an inexorable accusation of falsehood levelled against the Communist Party. There is no doubt that for Paolo Monelli there was no condemnation of Mussolini, no trial of Mussolini, no decree against Mussolini. There was simply a murder in circumstances that remained obscure. For writing these things in a book that sold 250,000 copies at the time, Monelli received no punishment. No one dared to sue him, let alone convict him of defamation. And this was in 1950. All this gives pause for thought.

Leo Valiani has his say

Born in Fiume in 1909, Senator for Life Leo Valiani was the longest-serving member of the CLNAI, the National Liberation Committee of Northern Italy, which, during the years of civil war,

from 1943 to 1945, represented the legitimate government of the King in the North. Arrested for anti-fascism in 1928, after serving time in prison and confinement, he emigrated to France in 1935, then to Mexico, before returning to Italy in September 1943. One of the main leaders of the Resistance, he became political secretary of the Action Party for Northern Italy and, living in strict secrecy in Milan, was called upon to join the CLNAI leadership as representative of his party, together with Ferruccio Patri, future head of the government. The other leaders of the Committee were Pertini and Morandi for the PSI, Arpesani and Jacini for the PII, Longo and Sereni for the PEI, Marrazza and Augusto De Gasperi (brother of Alcide) for the DE. It was these men (all now deceased) who imposed the death sentence on the Duce and his government.
Elected as a member of the Constituent Assembly, and therefore one of the fathers of our Constitution, Valiani devoted himself to intense activity as a historian and journalist in the post-war period. Among his most important books are *Tutte le strade conducono a Roma (All Roads Lead to Rome), Storia del movimento socialista (History of the Socialist Movement). Il Psi nel periodo della neutralità (The PSI in the Period of Neutrality), La dissoluzione dell'Austria-Ungheria (The Dissolution of Austria-Hungary), L'Italia di De Gasperi (De Gasperi's Italy)*, and finally *Sessant'anni di avventure e di battaglie (Sixty Years of Adventures and Battles).* In 1980, Leo Valiani was appointed senator for life. He died in 2000.
Leo Valiani's last interview on Mussolini's death sentence was given in February 1994 to the author of this book and was published in the Milan daily *La Notte*, at the end of a series of articles in which, for the first time, the thesis of 'British involvement' in the execution of Il Duce and Petacci was put forward. The author put forward the hypothesis to Valiani that it was the chief of staff of the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade, Luigi Canali ("Captain Neri"), who led the British executioners to the De Maria house where he himself had hidden Mussolini and his mistress. What was Valiani's response?
"I know nothing about Neri's movements. I never met him, I have never been to Dongo, I have never asked anyone who witnessed those events how things unfolded. Longo never reported anything to the CLNAI."
And again: "The death sentence that the CLNAI, 'by virtue of the powers delegated to it for occupied Italy by the Italian government,' issued on April 25, 1945 (see the volume *Verso il Governo del popolo,* pp. 324 ff.) concerned 'the members of the Fascist government and the leaders of Fascism, guilty of having contributed to the suppression of constitutional guarantees, of having destroyed popular freedoms, created the Fascist regime, compromised and betrayed the fate of the country, and led it to the current catastrophe'. For them, that decree provided for the death penalty and, in less serious cases, life imprisonment. Collaboration with the German occupiers was punished "according to the military laws of war in force on September 8, 1943." These laws also provided for execution by firing squad. I do not know whether all the people killed in Dongo and Giulino di Mezzegra collaborated with the Germans or not. If so, their execution was justified by the aforementioned CLNAI decree. If not, it was arbitrary. In any case, their sentence should have been handed down by the war tribunals, to be established in accordance with the CLNAI decree.

On that same occasion, and after the controversy that erupted in the press following the hypothesis put forward by the author of this book, Valiani reiterated to the agencies that it was not the partisan leadership that issued the order to shoot Claretta Petacci. "I confirm this without hesitation," said the senator, recalling that the CLNAI decree imposed the death penalty exclusively "on members of the fascist government and fascist leaders."
"The shooting of Claretta Petacci was never ordered," Valiani added, speaking to AdnKronos, "we didn't even know she was with Mussolini at that moment." Regarding the circumstances of the shooting of the Duce and his mistress (who carried it out, at what time, in what manner), Valiani stated: "We don't even know who carried it out at
we did not even know she was with Mussolini at that moment." Regarding the circumstances of the execution of the Duce and his mistress (who carried it out, at what time, in what manner), Valiani concluded: "Unfortunately, I know nothing about it. I don't even know if Luigi Longo actually went to Dongo. The CLNAI never received a report from Longo on how those events unfolded."
Two considerations can be drawn from these words: horror at the murder of a defenseless and innocent woman; posthumous resignation in the face of the overwhelming power of the communist component of the Resistance.

HOW MANY EXECUTIONERS FOR TWO CORPSES

As with the death sentences of Louis XVI and Thomas Moore, about which everything is known, as with those of all other great figures in history, so too is everything known about the great executions that have marked the history of mankind. We know who killed Julius Caesar (*"Tu quoque, Brute, fili mi,"* "You too, Brutus, my son!"), we know who killed Aldo Moro (the Red Brigade member Prospero Gallinari). But no one, not even the greatest historian of fascism, Renzo De Felice, has been able to shed light on Mussolini's death. There are many stories, many claims, many lies, many hypotheses. Nothing is certain. One of the most popular hypotheses today (according to which British agents 'beat the Soviets to it' the Soviets, i.e., the communist partisans, to silence two inconvenient voices, those of the Duce and his mistress, and to seize the compromising Musolini-Churchill correspondence) was first formulated, as mentioned in the previous chapter, by the author of this book in 1994. It was based, on the one hand, on the refutation of the official or unofficial versions that had been circulated up to that point and, on the other, on the study of the movements of an enigmatic character, the key figure in the whole affair, namely Luigi Canali, 'Captain Neri' of the Resistance in the Como area, the man who, from the afternoon of Friday, April 27, 1945, had Mussolini at his disposal, and who was assassinated on May 7 by his own
party comrades, the communists, with the official reason being an old death sentence against 'Neri' previously issued by a partisan court for alleged treason.

But before embarking on and proceeding along the 'English trail', it is worth retracing the steps of the most important and widely acclaimed claims that have been made over the past half-century.

Starting with the official one, the 'vulgate' that children still study in school books. The best known, but also, paradoxically, the most blatantly false: the one, even mythologized in the cinema, according to which Mussolini and Petacci were shot in front of the gate of Villa Belmonte, in Giuliano di Mezzegra, by Walter Audisio, 'Colonel Valerio'.

Audisio, an obscure party official and long-time member of parliament for the Italian Socialist Party, played the part of 'avenger' until the end of his days (he died in 1973) the part of the 'executioner' that the communist leaders had ordered him to play from the end of that dramatic 1945, when 24 episodes entitled *How I executed Mussolini* were published in *L'Unità,* the official organ of the Italian Communist Party, between November 18 and December 17. In these articles, full of grammatical errors, contradictions, and above all vulgarity (we have already mentioned Petacci worrying about putting on her panties and the executioner shouting at her, "Pull them off!"), the name of Walter Audisio is never mentioned. The identity of the "executioner" was revealed in 1947 during a public rally in Rome.

Only two years after his death, in 1975, the Communist Party's publishing house, Teti in Turin, posthumously published the so-called "memoir" of "Colonel Valerio," entitled *In nome del popolo italiano (In the Name of the Italian People).* Probably written by some *ghostwriter* from Botteghe Oscure, no less inaccurate and naive than the journalist who had drafted the 1945 "memoir" (suffice it to note that even the surname of the driver who would have driven the "avenger" to the place of execution is completely wrong, even though he had been interviewed by legions of journalists), this book is
the surname of the driver who allegedly drove the "executioner" to the place of execution, even though he had been interviewed by legions of journalists), this book is faithful to the first version only in its vulgarity. Although Petacci's panties no longer appear, the attempt to demonize Mussolini *posthumously* shines through on every page, starting with his alleged stupidity (he takes seriously someone who claims to be in charge of freeing him and meanwhile addresses him informally, treating him like a poor idiot: what fascist soldier would ever have dared to address the Duce informally?), culminating in the portrayal of a cowardly and trembling man, drooling in front of the 'executioner's' machine gun, to whom he appeals imploringly: 'But Colonel..., but Colonel...'.

This latter circumstance was refuted in 1996 by the posthumous revelations of Michele Moretti, the partisan known as "Pietro," made public by the Como-based scholar Giorgio Cavalieri in his book *Ombre sul lago (Shadows on the Lake):* "While 'Valerio', armed with a machine gun, pronounced the death sentence, Mussolini did not appear too

surprised and, when the weapon was pointed at him, he shouted enthusiastically: 'Long live Italy!'" ("The painful admission," Cavalieri points out, "was made on the afternoon of Thursday, October 25, 1990").

It would be too easy (and too long) to dwell on the contradictions and outright falsehoods of the author of the book, Walter Audisio. This has already been done by highly respected authors, such as Franco Bandini. It seems more important to focus on the substance of the "vulgate." Who gave "Colonel Valerio" the order to go to Dongo to shoot the so-called "hierarchs"? Which, and above all how many people, were ordered to be shot? On the basis of which sentence? And why was no official report ever drawn up on that execution for the legitimate Italian government (Prime Minister Ivanoe Bonomi, Head of State Lieutenant General Umberto di Savoia)?

Umberto di Savoia)? And—even more astonishing—why was no report drawn up even for the CLNAI, the National Liberation Committee of Northern Italy, which represented the Rome government in the north?

The answer to all these questions can be found in the number of people shot in Dongo. Neither Audisio in his book nor Pei ever admitted that the events in Dongo, far from being an execution carried out "in the name of the Italian people," were in fact a reprisal, directly mimicking the ferocious methods of the SS, to avenge the 15 martyrs of Piazzale Loreto (the 15 partisans shot in Milan the previous August following a GAP attack on a German truck in Viale Abruzzi). 'Colonel Valerio' left Milan with his team of executioners and with a precise order received not from the CLNAI, but from the 'Party': to take fifteen, one for each of those shot in Piazzale Loreto, plus the leader, Mussolini, and bring them alive to Piazzale Loreto where, in front of the entire population of Milan, the historic revenge was to be carried out.

'Colonel Valerio', whoever he was, arrived in Dongo, where the situation had been taken in hand by 'Captain Neri', who had reappeared almost miraculously after two months in hiding and was immediately welcomed with friendship and devotion by his men. Valerio was given a list containing the names of the 51 Italians captured in the fleeing German column, "plus the Spanish diplomat with his wife and children" (Marcello Petacci, brother of Claretta, his wife Zita Ritossa, and their young children Benvenuto and Ferdinando).

'Valerio' knew by heart Article 5 of the CLNAI decree of 25 April 1945, a decree that had the force of law: 'The members of the fascist government and the fascist hierarchy, guilty of having contributed to the suppression of constitutional guarantees, of having destroyed popular freedoms, created the fascist regime, compromised and betrayed the fate of the country, and led it to the current catastrophe, are punished with the death penalty'. He realised that the requirements of the article

fascist regime, compromised and betrayed the fate of the country, and led it to the current catastrophe, shall be punished with the death penalty." He realizes that the requirements of Article 5 can at most be applied to nine prisoners: Alessandro Pavolini, Francesco Barracu, Fernando Mezzasoma, Augusto Liverani, and Ruggero Romano, all ministers of Salò, as well as—stretching things a bit—the former prefect of Milan Luigi Gatti, the federal of Como Paolo Porta, and the commander of a black brigade, Idreno Utimpergher. But he 'has' to find fifteen. And so, he tragically ticks the boxes next to the names of six other people who would be rather difficult to define as 'creators of fascism' (such as the former founder of the Communist Party, Nicola Bombacci) or 'suppressors of constitutional guarantees' (such as Air Force captain Pietro Calistri). It doesn't matter. The names of Bombacci and Calistri, together with those of Goffredo Coppola, rector of the University of Bologna, Ernesto Daquanno, journalist, Mario Nudi, secretary to the Duce, and Vito Casalinuovo, Mussolini's aide-de-camp, are added to the list. All shot on the shore of the lake. To these, for good measure, is added - since the bloodbath has now begun - poor Marcello Petacci, lynched by the crowd. That makes sixteen.

After that, the 'executioner' reached the De Maria house in Bonzanigo. And what did he find there? Two corpses: those of Mussolini and Petacci. 'Someone' had beaten him to it.

A much more likely scenario: informed of the location where the two were, he found them late in the morning, already dead; he cursed; he realized that the order to bring the 'executed' alive to Piazzale Loreto could no longer be carried out, and decided to kill the 'fifteen' on the spot. All this after consulting by telephone with the 'bosses' in Milan.

Whichever of the two versions is true, it is the identity of the mysterious executioners of the

morning—the killers of Mussolini and Petacci—that the most independent historians have continued to question for over half a century, in an Italy that has calmly considered (and continues to consider) a massacre carried out without trial, without sentence, without conviction, without an official report to the Head of State or at least to the

Government, to be completely normal.
But let us turn to the other hypotheses formulated to date about the 'avenger' of Bonzanigo and his companions. The best known is the one that identifies him as Luigi Longo, the number two of the PCI, who is said to have left Milan as soon as he knew the exact location of the Duce, in order to personally carry out his execution. The most detailed description of the end of Mussolini and Petacci at the hands of Longo is contained in Urbano Lazzaro's book *Dongo, mezzo secolo di menzogne (Dongo, half a century of lies).* Lazzaro, the partisan "Bill," the man who had captured the Duce in the German column, was not present at the killing of Mussolini and his mistress, but he claims to have been able to reconstruct the scene in detail thanks to the testimonies that his former "comrades" could not deny him. However, credit must be given to historian Franco Bandini for being the first to identify Longo as the 'executioner' in 1978, the year his book *Vita e morte segreta di Mussolini (*The Secret Life and Death of Mussolini) was published. The author of this book had the opportunity to preview Bandini's revelation in an important weekly magazine of the time, and he did so with a provocative question to Longo, who had recently left the reins of the PCI to Enrico Berlinguer: 'Answer: is it true or false? Longo remained silent. Forever. Until his death. Is this enough to confirm that the reconstruction made by 'Bill' (and, before him, Bandini) reflects reality? It is difficult to answer.
Another hypothesis, perhaps more evocative but no less fitting, about who the "avenger" was has been put forward by Alessan-
dro Zanella in his book *L'ora di Dongo (The Hour of Dongo),* which is fundamental in reconstructing, minute by minute, the movements of Mussolini and his entourage starting from their escape from Milan on April 25, 1945. Mussolini and Petacci were allegedly killed by the same "Captain Neri" who had hidden them in the home of his farmer friends, the De Marias. He allegedly killed them to "redeem himself" with Pei, who considered him a traitor. This is an entirely logical theory, based, among other things, on clear and converging evidence (let us not forget that Zanella, as well as being a meticulous historian, was also a renowned criminal lawyer). The only perplexity: was "Neri's" "rash act" really considered by Pei to be so serious that it had to be punished with capital punishment, i.e., with the elimination of "Neri" himself (and his companion, the partisan "Gianna")? Or was the 'fault' of 'Neri' and 'Gianna' of a very different and much more generous nature, as we shall see later, at the conclusion of our work?
This brings us to the last and, in truth, most sensational version: that of Bruno Giovanni Lonati, a former partisan (or rather, former commander of Garibaldi brigades) residing in Brescia, who, in his book *Mussolini e Claretto: la verità (*Mussolini and Claretto: The Truth) (Milan, 1994), presents himself as the Duce's "executioner," acting on orders received from a British secret agent, the mysterious "Captain John." The latter, in turn, personally took care of eliminating Claretta Petacci. The order? Directly from Winston Churchill, both to regain possession of the famous correspondence and to silence the couple who, if questioned by the Americans, would certainly have spilled the beans on all the agreements (at that time absolutely unmentionable) between the British prime minister and the fascist Duce, in an attempt to turn Hitler against Stalin's Russia.
It must be said - at the conclusion of this compelling detective novel - that Bruno Lonati was unable to provide any proof of what he wrote. He did not even reveal the surname of 'Captain
John'. However, unbeknownst to him, the author of this book has gathered a significant clue that could support the veracity of his story, as will be seen in the chapter dedicated to this unusual character.

Let us now look in detail at the highlights of the four versions mentioned, taken from the books of their respective authors, to which a fifth reconstruction must be added: that of the unexpected, belated, and surprising Aldo Lampredi.

*Audisio: "I was the 'avenger'"**

"So we left Dongo by car at 3:10 p.m. sharp. With the driver [G.B. Geninazza], there were four of us on board [Audisio, Michele Moretti 'Pietro' and Aldo Lampredi 'Guido']. Leaving the lakeside road after Mezzegra, the side road, which the car struggled to climb, led us to Bonzanigo. Along this route, I chose the place for the execution: a bend in the road, a closed gate in an orchard. The location, about a kilometer from Bonzanigo, was called Giulino di Mezzegra. A little further on, I stopped the car and, getting out, I released the safety catch on the machine gun and fired a shot to test the weapon. It worked.
The De Maria farmhouse was halfway up the hillside, nestled in the mountains. The two partisans on guard [Giuseppe

Frangi "Lino" and Guglielmo Cantoni "Sandrino"] were standing on the landing near the door. One of the guards pulled the bolt, the door opened, and I entered the room. Mussolini was standing to the right of the bed, in uniform and wearing a hazelnut-colored overcoat. Petacci was in bed, under the covers.

* From the book *In nome del popolo italiano (In the Name of the Italian People)* by Walter Audisio, Teti Editore, Turin 1975, pp. 446 ff.

fully clothed. He looked at me fearfully and whispered, "What is it?" His lower lip was trembling. I thought this would be a precious opportunity for him to prove to an enemy that he was a man. No: that man was trembling with fear. Standing still at the door, I exclaimed, "I have come to free you," and continued to look at him. At my words, the expression on his face changed: "Really?" he muttered. "Hurry, we must hurry, there is no time to lose," I added. Meanwhile, he regained his boldness. "Where are we going?" he asked, already sure of himself.
Suddenly, there was no more fear or bravado in him, but haste had taken over. "Let's go," he said. He had completely forgotten about the woman in the bed, and I reminded him. "First her, the woman," I said. And turning to Petacci, I urged her with my eyes. She hurriedly gathered her personal belongings. At this point, Mussolini, his face transfigured, turned his head toward me and said, with the regained tone of a first marshal, "I offer you an empire!" He was the same man: the one in Bonzanigo who offered me an empire and the one who made historic promises from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia. Instead of answering him, I urged Petacci: "Come on, come on!" And Petacci joined Mussolini.
We set off along the mule track that descended from halfway up the hillside to the point where our black '1100' had come to a halt. Petacci hopped uncertainly along the steep path, hampered by the high heels of her black suede shoes. He, more 'Duce' than ever, walked briskly, confidently, with an air somewhere between a marching soldier and a man in a hurry. When we reached the car, Mussolini made a gesture to give Petacci precedence, but I said to him, "You go first, you're more covered. But with that fascist cap, it's a bit of a problem. Take it off." He took it off, but then ran his hand over his large bald head. "What about this?" he asked. "Then put your cap back on and pull
the visor down over your eyes." We set off. Mussolini and Petacci were sitting in the back seat of the car; the driver and Guido were in the front. Pietro stood on the running board on the woman's side. I sat on the rear right fender, with my back to the road and my face toward Mussolini. That way, I wouldn't lose sight of him for a single moment. As soon as we arrived at the gate, I ordered the car to stop.
I made Mussolini get out of the car and told him to stand between the wall and the gate pillar. He obeyed me as meekly as a lamb. He still did not believe he was going to die; he did not realize the reality of the situation. He had become tired, old, and hesitant again. He walked heavily, dragging his right leg a little. It was a moment: suddenly I began to read the text of the death sentence of the war criminal Mussolini Benito: "By order of the general command of the Volunteer Corps of Freedom, I am charged with bringing justice to the Italian people." He stared in amazement, his eyes wide, at the machine gun I was pointing at him. Petacci threw her arms around his shoulders. And I said, "Get away from there if you don't want to die too." The woman immediately understood the meaning of that "too" and moved away from the condemned man. As for him, he did not utter a single human word. He trembled, livid with terror, and stammered with those big lips in convulsion: "But, but, but... Colonel, but, but, but... Colonel!" He didn't even say a single word to the woman who was jumping around him, moving back and forth, her gaze revealing her infinite bewilderment. No, he begged, in the most cowardly way, for his big, trembling body.
I pulled the trigger, but the shots did not fire. The machine gun had jammed. Guidò grabbed the pistol, aimed to shoot, but - as if by fate - the pistol was jammed. Mussolini was no longer aware of anything. I called out loudly to Pietro, who came running to bring me his machine gun. The one who
He was supposed to live like a "lion," but he was a poor, trembling, broken rag, unable to move. He didn't look, he just trembled. His distraught face showed only fear, animal fear. He didn't even notice the presence of the woman who had been his wife. When I stood in front of him again, mitra in hand, I fired five shots into that trembling body. The war criminal slumped to his knees, leaning against the wall, his head resting on his chest. Petacci, beside herself, dazed, moved confusedly, was also shot and fell to the ground. It was 4:10 p.m. on April 28, 1945.

*"Bill": "The 'executioner' was Luigi Longo."**

Longo approached the door of the room and knocked vigorously. The dictator, dressed in a black shirt, riding breeches, and boots, opened the door immediately and stood still on the threshold while, behind him, Claretta Petacci rose, somewhat disheveled. Mussolini asked, "What is it?" "You must come with us immediately," replied Michele Moretti. Then he added, 'We have to take her somewhere else.' Claretta, who had been behind the Duce, stepped forward and asked suspiciously, 'But where are you taking us?' At that point, Longo preempted Moretti's reply and said curtly, 'We only have to transfer Mussolini. You can stay here, don't worry.' The woman reacted immediately to these words and replied decisively that she wanted to stay with Mussolini at all costs. Clinging to the Duce's arm, she shouted that they could not separate her from him. "All right, then come too. But hurry up! Both of you, hurry up!" Longo muttered nervously.

* From the book *Dongo, mezzo secolo di menzogne (Dongo, Half a Century of Lies)* by Urbano Lazzaro ("Bill"), Mondadori, Milan 1993, pp. 115 ff.

The two cars had their doors open and their drivers were already at the wheel. Longo invited Mussolini to get into the second car. Garetta Petacci was about to take her place next to her lover. At that moment, however, Longo signaled to Alfredo Mordini, who stopped the woman, pointing his machine gun at her chest and saying curtly, "Not you! You stay here." Witnessing such a reaction, Petacci cried out to Mussolini in shock, "Ben, they want to kill you! They want to kill you!" Mordini then whispered furiously*, "Tais-toi, putainer."* In an instinctive and desperate move, Garetta convulsively grabbed the barrel of Mordini's weapon with both hands and tried to wrest it from him. Longo jumped out of the car and, approaching the woman, pointed his revolver at her side and pulled the trigger several times. However, the gun did not fire. Longo then shouted angrily at Mordini: "Shoot her!", followed by a curse.
Meanwhile, Mussolini had struggled out of the car, shouting: "Don't commit such a crime! You can't! A woman..." At that point, "Captain Neri" intervened, grabbing Petacci by the shoulders and pulling her back forcefully to tear her away from Mordini's weapon. However, the woman was still firmly clutching the machine gun. A short burst of two or three shots was fired, but it was lethal for the Duce. Mussolini brought his hands to his throat and fell backwards. "Captain Neri" released Garetta, who threw herself on the ground on top of the gasping dictator, repeating between sobs: "You can't kill us like this! You can't!" Then, as she sobbed desperately in a daze, Mordini shouted at her: "Damned whore!" and fired a burst that killed her.
Meanwhile, Longo, Moretti, and Aldo Lampredi had bent over Mussolini, who was gasping ever more softly. Longo shouted at Moretti, "Finish him off!" After a moment's hesitation, the Garibaldian obeyed and fired a burst from his Mas.
Longo began to curse, swear, and rail against his comrades: "Damn you! You've ruined everything! Who's going to take us to Piazzale Loreto now, in front of the people of Milan, to fool those American and British pigs? It's all gone because of you! Idiots! You let a woman fool you!"

*Zanella's version: the "executioner" was Luigi Canali**

"It is 5:30 a.m. on April 28, 1945. Captain Neri (Luigi Canali) and Michele Moretti retrace their steps, enter the De Maria house, and climb the stairs. Lia De Maria and her husband slip away, not seeing and, in the end, not wanting to see. The two partisans knock on the door. Mussolini has just gone to bed, while Clara is sitting on the bed. They call out to them and order them to leave. Two men in front, one at their side, the other two behind, silent, with their weapons ready to fire. The partisans grab Petacci and drag her away from the Duce. She struggles, abandoning her bag and scarf, and furiously tries to return to her man, clinging to his body in a frenzy. "Mussolini must not die!" she cries desperately. "Get out of the way!" She screams, scratches, pleads, her guttural voice becoming high-pitched and heart-rending: "He must not die! No! He must not die!"
Captain Neri shouts at his men to restrain the woman. They manage to pull Clara away, but once again, with the strength of desperation, she throws herself on the machine gun pointed at Benito and grabs the barrel, trying to deflect it. They grab her by the shoulders and one shouts: "Shoot her too!" Mussolini, as if awakening from a nightmare, then shouts in a loud, dramatic voice: "No, no! You can't! It's murder! She's a woman..."

* From the book *L'ora di Dongo (The Hour of Dongo)* by Alessandro Zanella, Rusconi, Milan 1993, pp. 446 ff.

he hears the sound of a shutter in action and then the empty click of the hammer. Giuseppe Frangi ("Lino") and Captain Neri, confused, try to fire, but Neri's machine gun jams and he is unable to shoot. "Pass me yours!" he shouts to Michele Moretti, and he tries to aim, but Clara, her hair disheveled, her eyes frozen, once again stands in the way, shouting fiery words. They pull her away, punch her, and Neri finally manages to fire the first shots. The Duce brings his hands to his neck with a dull rattle. Clara screams, "You can't kill us like this! You are cowards!" She is hit in the face with a tremendous blow from the butt of the machine gun. It is Frangi who hits her on the right cheekbone: "Shut up, whore!" She staggers. "Do you want to die too?" Neri shouts at her. Frangi struggles to point the gun from below and fire another burst that hits the woman and also grazes Mussolini, who is already falling heavily to his knees. Clara no longer speaks, she collapses, as if struck by lightning, without a word.
The bodies lie on the ground, among a few pebbles and cardboard boxes abandoned in that corner, on the wet grass made shiny by the rain. The partisans struggle to compose themselves, they do not speak. They are upset. Michele Moretti is shaken by an uncontrollable tremor. Giuseppina Tuissi ("Gianna") checks to see if Claretta is really dead or if she is still breathing. They can hardly believe what they have done, so quickly, there, in that dark corner. Before them lies one of the most important men in the world, one of the most loved and hated, fallen by their blows. It was as easy as killing a dog.
Michele Moretti looks at Mussolini's body, which is contorted in extreme agony. He is still gasping for breath, so Moretti shoots him in the chest with a revolver to finish him off. Frangi is a little colder, looking around, picking up one or two shell casings, then straightening the Duce's body.
Lonati: "The 'executioners' were me and 'John'."

The story begins with the arrival of Bruno Lonati, the mission leader, the English captain 'John', and the partisans 'Bruno' and 'Gino' at the De Maria house in Bonzanigo. It is 10:30 a.m. on April 28. The quartet disarms, ties up, and gags the three partisans on guard. Lonati recounts*:
I pushed open the door and entered. I stopped, stunned. Mussolini was not alone; there was also a woman there. It was Petacci, I recognized her immediately. I said, "Good morning," but they remained silent. Mussolini was standing, Petacci was sitting on the edge of the bed. Meanwhile, John had also entered. Once the initial shock had passed, Mussolini made a move to speak. But I preempted him. 'We've come to transfer you and we have to hurry'. 'But who are you? Are you from somewhere else?' he said. 'Yes, we're from somewhere else', and, turning to John, 'He's English'. "I understand," said Mussolini. And turning to Petacci, he said, "You were right." Petacci nodded and replied with a smile.
At that moment, John cut short the pleasantries: "The papers, where are the papers?" "What papers?" he said. "The papers you had, don't be clever." "But I only have this bag," said Mussolini, pointing to a large, worn brown leather bag on the floor: "But these are just my writings, there's nothing important, nothing that would interest you." As John went through the papers, he said, "Nothing, nothing..." "But you had other papers?" he asked. "Yes," replied Mussolini, "and very important ones, but the others took them from me last night." "We've been cheated," said John, "who knows where that bag is now." Annoyed, he kept repeating: "The papers... the papers..." Then he said: "I'm going outside to listen to those three idiots." And he left me alone with the two of them.

* From the book *Quel 28 aprile. Mussolini e Claretta: la verità (That April 28. Mussolini and Claretta: the truth)*, by Bruno Giovanni Lonati, Mursia Editore, Milan 1994, pp. 79 ff.

"Where are you taking us now?" asked Mussolini. "You'll see," I said. They never called each other by name. He was kind to her, she was very sweet and condescending, as a woman in love and worried about her man can be. John came back in. "So, the papers were taken away last night," and he threw out a few expressions in English. "All right," he continued, "in that case we can go. We have to walk a bit, so get ready." Petacci gathered some handkerchiefs, a sweater, gloves, combs, medicines, and a few other personal items, calmly put them in her handbag, and sat back down on the bed. John and I went out onto the landing.
"So, what do we do?" I said, knowing full well what the answer would be. "We have to shoot them," said John. "Petacci too?" "Yes, Petacci too." "Why? What does she have to do with it?" "Because she knows many of Mussolini's secrets, because she probably knows the contents of the papers, and because if we don't do it, others will." "Not Petacci," I said. Bruno and Gino, who were now with us but had not yet entered the room, also joined in the

conversation. "Mussolini must be shot by an Italian, by you three," said John. "I'll do it," I said without hesitation, "if that's the case, let's leave the other two outside. I don't agree about Petacci, there's not much time, think about it again." We went back into the room. Mussolini had put on a rather long brown coat, approached the door, and saw the three partisans tied up on the floor. At that sight, he brightened up and appeared more confident. Evidently, the three imprisoned partisans were a positive development for him. He said so to Petacci, who got up, peered outside, and repeated patiently for the umpteenth time, "I told you that these ones are different and want to take us to safety." Mussolini asked, "Can I go out for some air?" And so I was left alone with Petacci. We exchanged a sad smile. "You didn't
come to transfer us, is that true?" "Yes." "Is it over for us?" "Yes, but for him, not for you," I said, lying. "Why?" "Because... because the others want it, because if we don't do it, whoever finds you here will do it soon, because there is no alternative, there is no escape." "Yes," she said, "I understand, maybe we were foolish, we could have saved ourselves... I'm asking you a favor." "Go ahead." "Don't let him know, don't make him suffer, he believes he can save himself, at least for now. I was the one who convinced him. Will you promise me?" "I promise," I said.
We went outside. Gino and Bruno were waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs. Mussolini and Petacci set off, with Gino and Bruno in front and John and I about ten meters behind Mussolini and Petacci. She was wearing a shaved fur coat, while Mussolini had his coat over his shoulders.
I stopped, called Gino, and explained what he had to do. As soon as he saw a suitable place, they had to stop, pretend that someone was coming, and drag the two of them indoors. He nodded and ran past Mussolini and Petacci, who had stopped. The conversation had taken place in a low voice and about twenty meters away from them. We resumed our walk in the same order. We didn't go very far, at most two hundred meters, and we saw Gino and Bruno stop. They turned and signaled with their hands to walk slowly, and returning to Mussolini and Petacci, they pushed them against the metal fence of a side lane and silenced them. While Gino and Bruno looked down at the road, we approached.
I was very quick, already holding the machine gun in firing position. About a meter away from him, I pulled the trigger and fired a shot at his heart. He remained standing, staring at me with a look of astonishment and surprise. I fired a few more shots, three or four, all in the same direction. Petacci moved sideways and, as Mussolini slowly slid to the ground, I moved away. John leaped to my right.
to my right. Petacci was slumping, almost accompanying Mussolini to the ground. At that point, John fired his shots at her, a longer burst than mine, aimed at her chest. No scream, no moan, just a strange grimace on the woman's face, almost a smile muffled by pain. She fell and hit the ground at the same time as Mussolini. It was all over.
We covered the faces and part of the chests of the two dead men with our coats. "Let's go," I said. It was just after 11 a.m. on April 28.

Lampredi: "And Mussolini shouted: 'Aim for the heart!'"

An investigation entitled *I quattro giustizieri di Mussolini (The Four Executioners of Mussolini),* conducted by the author of this book and published in the monthly magazine *Storia illustrata* on January 20, 1996, which definitively dismantled the communist "vulgate" on the end of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci, prompted the PDS to publish, with great prominence, in its official organ, *l'Unità,* a document that the party had kept in its secret archives since 1972. What was it? It was a report "to comrade Cossutta" (later president of Rifondazione Comunista) written by Aldo Lampredi "Guido," the PEI leader who accompanied Walter Audisio (the alleged "Colonel Valerio") on the famous "mission" to Dongo on April 28, 1945. What was not understood, and still is not understood (unless one resorts to the image of a trapped animal trying to save itself by clinging to every possible foothold), is why Lampredi waited 27 years to write that report and deliver it to his party, and why the party, in turn, waited another 24 years to make it public. If the aim was that stated by *l'Unità* ("to put an end to

a thousand speculations surrounding those events," the last of which—in the opinion of the party leaders—was represented by *the Storia illustrata* investigation*),* then it failed miserably.
The "Lampredi report" did not present any substantial new information compared to the completely unreliable report written by Walter Audisio. If anything, it added further elements of doubt. It seemed absolutely crazy to describe the bald Mussolini as - in Lampredi's own words - "an old man with white hair." In an attempt to reinforce its curious

scoop, L'Unità returned to the subject in the following days, interviewing other surviving former PEI leaders who had participated in the events in Dongo. The results were catastrophic. A certain Mario Ferro claimed, for example, that he and Lampredi had chosen "the 18 to be shot." But weren't there fifteen? And then there is the gem about the Americans who stopped the "executioners" on their way back to Milan in Menaggio and did not notice that their truck was full of corpses.

In truth, the "documents" published by *l'Unità* did not clarify anything, with all those alleged executioners appearing, disappearing, affirming, denying, contradicting each other, and hating each other. Even the "Lampredi report" was no exception to the rule. While Walter Audisio had described Mussolini as trembling and cowardly in front of the machine gun, "Comrade Guido" revealed that the Duce had "opened the collar of his coat and exclaimed: 'Aim for the heart! That was all. After all, Pei had merely kept this phrase hidden for fifty years, a phrase that does credit even to a despised dictator like Mussolini. The impression was that the PCI/PDS needed a serious historian more than a few not-too-skilled shooters.

IN DONGO, ON THAT 28TH OF APRIL

On the 'gold of Dongo' (the gold, coins, and jewelry seized by the partisans from Mussolini and his ministers as they fled), on the drama of Dongo (the execution without trial, on April 28, 1945, of the ministers and other people in the Duce's entourage, for a total of 16 murdered), on the mystery of Giulino di Mezzegra (the shooting, on the same day, of Benito Mussolini and his mistress Claretta Petacci), dozens and dozens of books have been written by Italian and international journalists and historians, which would be impossible to list here.
New articles, journalistic investigations, and television documentaries on these events are constantly being published in Italy, but also in America, Japan, and dozens of other countries. April 28, 1995, marked the fiftieth anniversary. It was thought that the archives would be opened and that we would finally arrive at a single truth, the historical truth. Nothing. This truth continues to be scrupulously concealed by the heirs of the communists who worked on behalf of Stalin's Russia and who were the main protagonists of those events (the various institutes of the Resistance, the archives of the Liberation Movement, the Central State Archives itself, where there are officials linked to the ideology of the Left). But not only by them. The British also played a major, yet still mysterious, role. The British, too, have never told the truth. Only the Americans, the only ones who wanted Mussolini alive, and the only ones who took action to that end
(but also the only ones to have been outmaneuvered) made all the material they could recover available to historians. Not much. Too little to know the truth. The only truth that, as we shall see, we know today is this: political corruption was born in Dongo and went unpunished, just as the mysteries of Italy that continue to be an unseemly part of our history began in Dongo.

Vinchiesta is born: the lawyer and the partisan

In February 1994, the author of this book returned to these events because the editor of the Milanese daily newspaper *La Notte* asked him to examine and comment on a series of 'after' documents, documents that accompanied the sad and pitiful events surrounding the bodies of those who had been shot, displayed for public ridicule in Piazzale Loreto from 3:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on April 29, 1945: a terrible way to begin the anti-fascist Republic, after the atrocities and illegalities committed by the fascist regime.
Shortly before, two people of value and moral stature had tried to investigate "until the very last moments" of Mussolini and Petacci, failing to discover the definitive truth, but achieving the result of tearing apart "half a century of communist lies" forever. These two people were Urbano Lazzaro (the former partisan 'Bill', who personally captured Benito Mussolini in the central square of Dongo) and Alessandro Zanella, a respected lawyer from Mantua who had made historical research into the end of the fascist leader the not insignificant purpose of his free time and who, since then, the author of these pages was honored to have as a friend and companion in historical research until his untimely death. The two books they published

were, we recall, the following: *Dongo: mezzo secolo di menzogne* (Mondadori, 1993) and *L'Ora di Dongo* (Rusconi, 1993).
Obviously, neither of them was present at Mussolini's killing. 'Bill' was in Dongo, guarding the 'executioners'. As for Zanella, he was three years old!
"Bill" published everything he had learned by interviewing hundreds of people in the area, obsessed for a lifetime with those grandiose and tragic events, in which he had played no small part. He confirmed, with dozens of pieces of evidence, what had been Franco Bandini's first important conclusion in 1978, published in his seminal *work Vita e morte segreta di Mussolini (The Secret Life and Death of Mussolini):* Mussolini and Petacci had not been shot at around 4 p.m. on April 28, but many hours earlier, and without witnesses; at least, without impartial witnesses. At around 4 p.m., a fake execution was staged in front of the wall of Villa Belmonte, so that the people of the village, from behind their shutters, could see, or rather hear, something, and corroborate the official thesis that the communists had

always maintained since then: 'We killed the tyrant, executioners in the name of the Italian people'. Furthermore, according to 'Bill', 'Colonel Valerio' was not the modest party bureaucrat Walter Audisio, an accountant by profession, but Luigi Longo, the inflexible military leader of the PCI and, later, national secretary of the party, after Togliatti and before Berlinguer.
Lazzaro also described the version presented by the PEI as ″so full of inaccuracies and falsehoods" that it "borders on the ridiculous and vulgar.″ And, after 50 years, he dismantled, one by one, all the lies contained in the famous 24 episodes published *in L'Unità* starting *on November 18, 1945, under the title "How I executed Mussolini. A story signed by 'Colonel Valerio,'" which, as mentioned,* was signed *by "Colonel Valerio," who, as mentioned, was not Walter Audisio, but Luigi Longo. Unità* starting on November 18, 1945, under the title *Come giustiziai Mussolini* (*How* I *executed Mussolini).* The story was signed by "Colonel Valerio," who, as mentioned above, was presented to the press by Pei as Walter Audisio only in 1947.
Those 24 episodes, considered gospel by too many naive historians, including those who write school textbooks, were dictated to Francesca De Tornasi, typist for the general command of the CVL (Corpo Volontari della Libertà, or Volunteer Corps of Freedom), by Walter Audisio and Aldo Lampredi, the gray eminence of the PEI, with Audisio pausing after every sentence and asking Lampredi: "Is that okay?" "When the episodes were finished," De Tornasi told "Bill" many years later, "Lampredi approached Audisio and, patting him on the shoulder, said, 'All right, from now on, you play the hero.'"
What a hero! "Bill" exposes at least sixty lies told by someone who knew neither the places nor the people and had never even been there. And the vulgarities! "Colonel Valerio" writes (or rather, dictates): "Petacci was in bed. She frantically searched for her panties, which she couldn't find. 'Hurry up! Quick!' And she said, 'But I don't have any panties...' 'Pull them off, don't think about it.'" But "Bill" says: "That evening, Petacci couldn't not have her panties on, because she was menstruating. Giacomo De Maria revealed to American Colonel Lada Mokarski, and to me, that this detail had been confided to him by his wife." So, someone ripped the poor woman's panties off after she died, to complete the mockery.
And to complete Mussolini's "cretinization," it was at that point that "Valerio" said he told him, bursting into the bedroom: "I've come to free you! Come on, hurry up!" Verbatim, addressing the Duce and Petacci informally, indeed, pushing them out; with Mussolini responding by promising him: "I'll give you an empire!"; and then, faced with the machine gun, he would have shown only cowardice: "Mussolini was trembling, livid with terror, stammering with those big lips in convulsion: 'But... but... Colonel...'".
Witnesses? None. Those who survived remained silent until their deaths. Those who could have contradicted him were killed like dogs: "Neri," "Gianna," "Lino," Anna Bianchi, his father.
In this tangle, "Bill" could not prove that it was Longo who killed Mussolini and Claretta. Just as the excellent Alessandro Zanella could not prove that it was "Captain Neri" who killed them. Only hypotheses. Hypotheses that nevertheless constituted progress compared to the contradictions (misdirection?) and the unspoken words of *L'Unità* and the communists. But they were still hypotheses. To arrive at a convincing reconstruction of the event, it was necessary to think more deeply, demolish more forcefully, and look further ahead. Once again, it was necessary to venture into the minefield that leads to Bonzanigo, the place where Mussolini and Claretta died. First, however, it was necessary to carry out a brief review of the events that had begun in Dongo, on Lake Como, on the afternoon of Friday, April 27, 1945. This is what the author of this book decided to do for the benefit of the readers of *La Notte* in 1994. The conclusions are as follows.

A reliable reconstruction

In Dongo, on that rainy spring day, Benito Mussolini, dictator of Italy for twenty years and finally, for 18 months, head of the short-lived RSI (Italian Social Republic), fell into the hands of the partisans while, with his entourage, he attempted to reach Valtellina for a last-ditch, desperate resistance, or, more likely, to wait there for the Anglo-Americans, who had by then occupied the whole of the north, and surrender himself as a prisoner.
Mussolini was not alone. He was followed by six ministers from his government (Francesco Maria Barracu, Deputy Prime Minister, Augusto Liverani, Minister of Communications, Fer

nando Mezzasoma, Popular Culture, Alessandro Pavolini, Secretary of the Republican Fascist Party, Ruggero Romano, Public Works, and Paolo Zerbino, Interior), his mistress Clara Petacci, who is traveling in her brother Marcello's Alfa Romeo, and a small entourage of officials, drivers, police officers, and soldiers of the GNR (Republican National Guard). In total, there were about sixty people, who hoped to get away with it by joining a convoy of German soldiers, but the latter cowardly abandoned them to the partisans in order to get a clear run without having to fire a shot.

The news of the Duce's capture spread like wildfire from Dongo to Milan, and from Milan to the various Allied military commands. Thus began a frantic race between the Americans, British, and Russians (the three victors of World War II) to be the first to get their hands on the Duce and his highly important documents, those proving his secret relations with the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

The Americans and British had dozens of trusted agents on Italian soil. The Russians were no less active: although the Red Army had not set foot in Italy, the entire PEI apparatus, which controlled most of the partisan formations, including the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade that had captured Mussolini and the others, was working under their orders.

Two conflicting orders came out of Milan. General Cadorna, military leader of the Resistance, ordered that Mussolini be handed over alive to the Allies, as stipulated in the armistice terms. But the CLNAI (National Liberation Committee of Northern Italy), the supreme political body of the Resistance, ordered that Mussolini (note: Mussolini alone) be immediately executed without trial.

The communists, the most aggressive on the military front, were tasked with carrying out this order, but they did so with a twist: on their own initiative, they decided to shoot not only Mussolini, but also fifteen other people: as many as the unfortunate 'martyrs of Piazzale Loreto'.

: on their own initiative, they decided to shoot not only Mussolini, but also fifteen other people: the same number as the unfortunate "martyrs of Piazzale Loreto," fifteen hostages shot on August 10, on the orders of German SS General Tensfeld, by a platoon of fascists from the Muti Legion, in retaliation for an attack carried out by communist gappisti (from Gap, patriotic action groups) against a German truck distributing food to the population at the beginning of Viale Abruzzi, at the corner with Piazzale Loreto. In that attack (time bombs had been hidden among baskets of bread and vegetables), a German marshal named Karl, whom the people called "el Carlùn," four other German soldiers, and nine men, women, and children lost their lives. All of them were from Milan. Thirteen people were injured, including many children. Today, all this has been forgotten. This is due to the long-standing "cultural" hegemony of the communists, which extended from partisan associations to the editorial directors of many publishing houses, including those of the main school publishers.

In Milan, at the headquarters of the CLNAI, the communists say: fifteen of our people died, fifteen fascists died. Plus, of course, their leader, the Duce. And revenge. The "vulgate" (the official version accredited to this day by the communists themselves, but which, in the light of the most recent historical research, no longer believes) is that Mussolini and Petacci, transported to a house in Bonzanigo, a hamlet of Tremezzina, were taken outside at around 4 p.m. on April 28, placed against the wall of a villa, and shot by 'Colonel Valerio' and his men. 11 This 'Colonel Valerio' immediately moved to Dongo, took the other prisoners out of the town hall, chose 15 of them one by one, lined them up along the parapet bordering the lake, and had them shot. After that, as there were too many, he also had Claretta's brother killed.

Petacci, who tried to save himself by pretending to be a Spanish diplomat.

The moral of this (ugly) story is that the 16 corpses from Dongo were thrown onto a truck, which, a few kilometers further on, stopped to complete its load with the bodies of Mussolini and Petacci. The 18 bodies were unloaded during the night in Piazzale Loreto, Milan, hoisted by their feet onto a petrol station and exposed to the ridicule of the crowd until the early afternoon of Sunday, April 29, when, on the orders of an American officer, they were taken to the morgue in Via Ponzio.

The 'black' list

But let's go back and reflect for a moment on the list of prisoners held in the town hall of Dongo. In fact, let's read it, to understand that revenge was indeed carried out in Dongo. Let us read, therefore, the list of 31 prisoners (i.e., those considered the most important, the others having been locked up in the Carabinieri barracks commanded by Brigadier

Ettore Manzi) handwritten by 'Captain Neri', Luigi Canali, chief of staff of the 52nd Garibaldi Partisan Brigade, and delivered to the deputy commander of the brigade, 'Bill' (Urbano Lazzaro), with orders to take them into custody, while 'Neri' himself, accompanied by commander 'Pedro' (Pier Luigi Bellini delle Stelle), political commissar 'Pietro' (Michele Moretti) and the partisan "Gianna" (Giuseppina Tuissi), transferred Benito Mussolini and Claretta Petacci (whose name, however, does not appear on the list, precisely because no one considered her an "important prisoner") to a "safe" hiding place in Bonzanigo di Giulino di Mezzegra (Municipality of Tremezzina) during the night of April 28.

The list was seized from "Bill" by "Colonel Valerio" (whether Longo or Audisio), who arrived in Dongo with a platoon of partisans from Milan on the afternoon of April 28. "Valerio" therefore had to choose 15 people to be shot, in addition to Mussolini, to balance - as written, even if Pei never admitted it - the 15 "martyrs of Piazzale Loreto." In fact, alongside the Duce, six were his ministers, but nine were people who had no direct responsibility for the outbreak of civil war. They were 'chosen' by 'Colonel Valerio' from the names on the list, based on his personal criterion of - let's call it - 'justice'. For example, between a colonel and an airman, he chose the colonel; between a journalist and a driver, he chose the journalist; between a professor and a motorcyclist, he chose the professor. There was a logic to it. He made only one exception. Having to reach the number of 15 'fucilandi' (he called them that; before the firing squad opened fire, he was heard shouting: 'Fucilandi! Attention!'), and since there was not even a second lieutenant or a journalist, even an intern, on the list, he picked a name at random: Mario Nudi, a poor man, an employee of the Fascist Confederation of Agriculture and seconded (but 'Valerio' did not know this) to the Duce's secretariat.
But here is the list (the names of those shot are underlined):
Barracu Francesco Maria, colonel, undersecretary to the Prime Minister
Barzotti Erminio, employee at the Municipality of Milan
Beltrami Teresio, FFS inspector, Ministry of Communications Bombacci Nicola, publicist
Brocchi Antonio, boxer
Cali stri Pietro, pilot captain
Carradori Pietro, Mussolini's aide Casalinuovo Vito, Colonel of the GNR Cetti Francesco, driver for the Federal of Como Porta
Coppola Goffredo, rector of the University of Bologna Daquanno Ernesto, journalist, director of the Stefani Agency
De Stavola Gabriele, marine of the X.a Mas
Frighi Alfredo, mechanic
Gatti Luigi, prefect on call, secretary to Mussolini Ghezzi Luigi, airman
Laghetto Domenico, soldier of the GNR, driver Liverani Augusto, Minister of Communications Marcucci Cesare, driver
Mezzasoma Fernando, Minister of Popular Culture Montermini Otello, soldier of the GNR, barber Mussolini Benito
Nudi Mario, employee of the Fascist Confederation of Agriculture
Nicoletti Giuseppe, motorcyclist
Pallottelli Virgilio, aviation officer
Pavolini Alessandro, Secretary of the Pfr
Piazza Francesco, soldier in the GNR, driver
Porta Paolo, PFR inspector for Lombardy
Rebecchi Armando, soldier of the GNR Romano Ruggero, Minister of Public Works Utimpergher Idreno, commander of the BBNN of Empoli Zerbino Paolo, Minister of the Interior.

When "Valerio" arrives in Dongo, he snatches the list from "Bill's" hands and begins to mark the names of those to be "shot." At that point, he already knows that Mussolini has died along with Petacci, has already decided that he will soon go to "shoot" the corpse, has already agreed with his "superiors" (or decided himself on the spot, if it is really Longo) on the version of Claretta's death to be handed down to history: an accident, killed by mistake, she was agitated, frantic, moving, she got between the machine gun and the condemned man, she was hit
by the shots, no one will ever know how many and of what caliber, there will never be an autopsy.

Things, therefore, went wrong. He was supposed to bring fifteen "living leaders" plus their boss, the Duce, to Milan for the final catharsis of public execution in Piazzale Loreto. Oh well. He'll bring corpses. Fifteen, anyway. Plus one. Exactly as agreed. He could have spared a life, perhaps that of the pilot captain, and put Petacci in his place. Just to make fifteen. But the Resistance makes no concessions. And his brother pays the price too.
Marcello Petacci, like Claretta, was not on the list, but someone, namely the zealous timber merchant Luca Schenini from Dongo, hastened to whisper in Valerio's ear: "Colonel, look over there, at the end of the square, in that hotel, there's Vittorio Mussolini, the Duce's son!' At this point, 'Valerio' certainly could not allow 'Mussolini's son' to get away with it. He called 'Bill' and ordered him: 'Go and get Vittorio Mussolini and bring him here, so we can shoot him too. "Bill" soon discovered that the unfortunate man was not Vittorio Mussolini, but Marcello Petacci. He accompanied him to the square and revealed his identity to "Valerio." Then, a unanimous cry rose from the group of condemned men: "We don't want him with us! He's a traitor! A spy!" "Valerio" sent him back. He wasn't interested in shooting him. But poor Petacci was practically lynched by the crowd. It wasn't "Valerio" who had him killed. So much so that he refused to load his body onto the truck headed for Piazzale Loreto. It would further upset his calculations, already thrown off balance by his unfortunate sister. Fifteen corpses were enough for him: fifteen plus one. But Michele Moretti forced him to take him away. The Petacci siblings were two embarrassing overweight people. They did not fit into the calculations of
revenge. Never mind. They too will end up in Piazzale Loreto. And that is why the corpses on the truck, which were supposed to be sixteen, become eighteen: the six ministers, the nine poor wretches, plus Mussolini, plus the two Petacci.
These considerations allow us to observe that Petacci's killing was absolutely not planned. No one at the CLNAI wanted it, neither Sandro Pertini, nor Leo Valiani, nor Longo himself. The fact is that Longo (and at this point it is very likely that 'Valerio' was him) found her dead, together with Mussolini, when, late in the morning, he arrived at the lake and was informed by 'Neri', 'Pietro' and their men that someone had beaten him to it. That is why the plan had to be frantically changed. That is why the fifteen were murdered in that small village of few souls, along that anonymous railing on the lakefront, without solemnity, without tragic grandeur, without journalists, photojournalists, and cameramen, without the *'coram populo'*. Like animals. Like in a bank robbery.
But who had killed Mussolini? Who had arrived in Bonzanigo before Colonel Valerio? And who had really taken Mussolini's documents and correspondence?
Was it a British commando unit?

A conclusive hypothesis?

At the end of that reconstruction, which mediated between the versions of Zanella and the partisan "Bill" and was widely reported in the press around the world, the author of this book found himself faced with important unresolved questions.
The British hypothesis, if confirmed, would have smoothed out the inconsistencies in the deaths of Mussolini and Claretta present in both Zanella's and the partisan 'Bill's' versions.

According to Zanella—who correctly places the event on the morning of the 28th—it was "Captain Neri" who decided to execute the two, to curry favor with the party and to be forgiven for the suspicions that had been hanging over him since the previous February, when he was believed to be a fascist spy. But this hypothesis was contradicted by the personality of 'Neri', whose writings the author of this book had been able to consult, gaining such a deep understanding of him that he was convinced that he would never have killed a poor woman in that way.
As for 'Valerio' (whom 'Bill' also paints as a bloodthirsty beast, identifying him with Luigi Longo and placing his execution of the Duce and his mistress in the morning rather than the afternoon of April 28), who could ever believe that a tough guy, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, a man of ice like him, was unable to immobilize a desperate woman if - as he had decided - he intended to spare her life?
It was then that the author of the investigation turned to Senator Leo Valiani. "Dear Senator Leo Valiani," he wrote in an "open letter," "You, who are the only one of those 'greats' still lucid and so loyal and forthright, finally say that you found that poor woman dead at your feet. Killed, along with Mussolini, by those who arrived in Bonzanigo before you.

I mean before you shareholders, communists, socialists, Christian Democrats, liberals, and so on. In short, before you Italians. And, having filled those two poor bodies with lead, he left, eliminating what Churchill feared more than anything else: their testimony, on the basis of which Stalin, had he known about it, could have obtained much more than half of Europe for himself. Perhaps Italy. Is that not so? Can you help us, Senator? I'm not asking you. The young people who are twenty years old today are asking you.

Valiani's response was not long in coming. Courageous as he had always been (for example, during the years of the Red Brigades, he had not hesitated to challenge them openly in an interview with the author of this book, regardless of the danger to his life), he opened the door of his office in Via Borgospesso, sat down—as he did with journalists—at his typewriter (an Olivetti Lexicon 80), placed the paper in the tabulator, adjusted the margins, and then began: "Go ahead, ask me the first question." From that moment on, his two index fingers began to tap away at the keyboard like a machine gun. After about two hours, he handed me, with the benevolence of a perfect gentleman, some fragments of history. Here is an important passage:

"None of us ordered the shooting of Claretta Petacci, whom we didn't even know was with Mussolini at the time. I know nothing about the circumstances of the Duce's and his mistress's execution: who carried it out, at what time, in what manner. Nor do I know whether Luigi Longo actually went to Dongo. The CLNAI never received a report from Longo on how those events unfolded."

This statement showed how the communists had literally done whatever they wanted in those days, strengthened by the terror they inspired in everyone, both their comrades and their opponents. In the dialogue I established with Valiani, which was as always open and frank, I did not fail to mention the new hypothesis on the killing of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci, which had just been put forward in the pages of *La Notte:* killed on the morning of April 28 by British Special Force agents, who then willingly left the communists with the "boast" of having murdered an innocent woman. Perhaps—who knows—in exchange for some favor, for pretending not to have seen something that should not have been seen: 'We did not see what you did not want us to see, and you did not see us killing Claretta Petacci'... But let's reread the main questions put to Valiani and his answers:

Garibaldi: "I have just read the letters and recordings of telephone calls between Mussolini, Petacci, Marshal Oraziani, Pavolini, and other members of the Salò government, recently published in the book *II sacco d'Italia* by Picciotti Lazzero. In these letters and phone calls, the Duce constantly refers to the bundle of his letters with Churchill, to the need for them not to fall into enemy hands, to the possibility of presenting them in court to save his position and that of fascism. Claretta was therefore perfectly aware of these secret negotiations. What is your opinion of Mussolini's constant and almost obsessive references to his ability to obtain any favor from Churchill at any time?

Valiani: "I believe Mussolini was deluding himself. Churchill may have made promises to him to persuade him to turn against Germany, especially in 1940-41, when Hitler seemed victorious, but in 1945, when Allied victory was certain, he could have ignored the revelation of those promises (assuming he had actually made them). Of course, it would have been convenient for him to get his letters back and destroy them, but even if they had fallen into Soviet hands, it would not have been the end of the world for him. For Mussolini, however, it was the end of the world, and in order not to be crushed by it, he was deluding himself."

Garibaldi: "Captain Neri suddenly reappeared, after two months in hiding, in Dongo on the afternoon of April 27, a few hours after Mussolini's capture. No one knows who informed him of the event. He claims to have received orders from Colonel Sardagna, Cadorna's man in Como, to take Mussolini and Petacci alive to Villa Cademartori in Blevio, so that they could be handed over to the Allies. Is this credible? Did Cadorna give that order or not?"

Valiani: "In his book *La riscossa,* Milan, 1948, on p. 260, General Cadorna states that he was determined to refuse to hand Mussolini over to the Anglo-Americans and that he therefore signed, on the night of April 27-28, 1945, the pass for Aldo Lampredi and Walter Audisio, who were to go and shoot Mussolini. Franco Bandini [historian, author of *Vita e morte segreta di Mussolini (The Secret Life and Death of Mussolini),* Milan, 1978] states that Cadorna then changed his mind at the request of the Americans, but there is no evidence of this, or at least I am not aware of any.

Garibaldi: 'Pedro', 'Pietro' and 'Bill' (i.e. Pier Bellini delle Stelle, Michele Moretti and Urbano Lazzaro, respectively commander, political commissar and deputy political commissar of the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade, which had captured the Duce and his henchmen in Dongo) blindly trust 'Neri' (chief of staff of the Brigade). He is the one who arranges everything. He is the one who hides Mussolini and Claretta in the home of the De Maria family, his friends and the

only people he knows. This happens at around 3:30 a.m. on April 28. Then he goes to Como and disappears for a few hours. No one knows where he went or who he warned. His "superiors" in the PEI or his "contacts" in the British secret service?
Valiani: "I know nothing about 'Neri's' movements. I never met him, I was never in Dongo, I never asked anyone who witnessed those events how things unfolded. Longo - I repeat - never reported anything to the CLNAI."
Garibaldi: "The theory of the double execution (the real one in the morning, at the De Maria house or just outside, and the fake one in the afternoon of the 28th in front of the wall of Villa Belmonte) was put forward by Franco Bandini and confirmed by 'Bill' (who claims that 'Colonel Valerio' is Longo, accompanied by Mordini, Moretti, 'Neri' and others), reconfirmed by Alessandro
Zanella in *L'ora di Dongo, and* finally scientifically confirmed by the autopsy performed by Professor Caio Mario Cattabeni and by the studies conducted by Professor Aldo Alessiani on the autopsy report. What is your opinion on this matter?
Valiani: "I know nothing about it and have no opinion on the matter. A double execution would have been even more macabre than the display of the corpses in Piazzale Loreto, which the CLNAI deplored (see the volume *Verso il Governo del popolo. Atti e documenti del CLNAI 1943/46,* Milan, 1977, p. 334). But, honestly, believe me, I know nothing about it."
Garibaldi: "Amerigo Ciocchiatti, the president of the 'partisan military tribunal' that had sentenced 'Captain Neri' to death, writes on p. 249 of his book *Dall'antifascismo al de profundis per il Pei:* 'Pier Bellini delle Stelle [...] states that 'Neri' could very well have been a British spy. [...] The serious fact, which can be assumed with some certainty, is that 'Neri' himself could have been the person capable of handing Mussolini over to the British.' Ciocchiatti's indignation stems from the fact that he was a communist and therefore considered such an action particularly serious if carried out by a communist like 'Neri'. Otherwise, it was certainly not dishonorable at that time for an Italian anti-fascist to collaborate with the Anglo-Americans. It was always better than collaborating with the Russians. Don't you agree?
Valiani: "Italian anti-fascists collaborated with the Anglo-Americans because they expected them to liberate Italy from German occupation. The Badoglio government itself declared war on Germany on October 13, 1943, which had attacked Italy the day after September 8, the date on which the Italian government exercised its inalienable right as a sovereign country to sign the armistice after a misguided and totally lost war with the Anglo-Americans. However, in March 1944, the Badoglio government was recognized
by the Soviet Union, thus becoming a co-belligerent not only of the Anglo-Americans but also of the Soviets themselves. Of course, the Anglo-Americans offered greater assurances than the Soviets for the future of Italy, especially with regard to relations with Yugoslavia.
Garibaldi: 'Do you believe the statement issued by the PEI in 1947 on the death of 'Neri', according to which he was 'executed' by 'mountain formations' in accordance with the old sentence? After he had been the *deus ex machina* of the events in Dongo on April 28?
Valiani: "Actually, it does not seem plausible to me that 'Neri' was executed by mountain formations without the PEI having ordered his death. But, I repeat, I know nothing about it."
Garibaldi: "Don't you think that shooting nine other people (including an Air Force captain who had nothing to do with it, Professor Coppola, old Bombacci, and journalist Daquanno) was an illegal act for which the Communist Party is responsible, along with the theft of the so-called 'Dongo gold'?
Valiani: "The death sentence that the CLNAI, 'by virtue of the powers delegated to it for Italian-occupied Italy,' issued on April 25, 1945 (see *Verso il Governo del popolo,* on pp. 324 ff.) concerned 'the members of the fascist government and the hierarchs of fascism, guilty of having contributed to the suppression of constitutional guarantees, of having destroyed popular freedoms, created the fascist regime, compromised and betrayed the fate of the country, and led it to the current catastrophe'. For them, that decree provided for the death penalty and, in less serious cases, life imprisonment. Collaboration with the German occupiers was punished "according to the military laws in force on September 8, 1943." Even
These laws provided for execution by firing squad. I do not know whether the individuals mentioned above collaborated with the Germans or not. If so, their execution was justified by the aforementioned CLNAI decree. If not, it was arbitrary. In any case, their sentence should have been handed down by the courts of war, to be established in

accordance with the CLNAI decree. As for the tampering with the so-called "Dongo gold," it was certainly an arbitrary act.

/ Karl Wolff's secrets

On March 28, 1973, General Karl Wolff, former commander of the German SS in Italy during the occupation and civil war, gave journalist Ricciotti Lazzero, who had gone to interview him, several copies of letters and recordings of telephone calls by Benito Mussolini, which he had kept in his archives. General Karl Wolff never did anything for nothing. Released from prison after 12 years of detention and left without a job, he made a living by selling memoirs and documents, little by little, to journalists and historians who came to interview him. The author of this book knows this because in 1983, a year before he died at the age of 82, he went to interview him on behalf of an important Italian weekly magazine in the town of Prien-am-Chiemsee, Bavaria, and had to take 4 million lire in German marks with him: one million for each of the four articles that were subsequently published. So, even if no one can say for sure, it is reasonable to assume that Lazzero (or his publisher) paid a lot, a lot more, to obtain those documents. Especially since those documents are of extraordinary interest. Sensational. In the sense that they suggest that the 'elusive' Mussolini-Churchill correspondence was not elusive at all; that the secret relationship between the two politicians (Mussolini and Churchill) continued, and continued until the last days of the Duce's life; that Mussolini was practically Churchill's 'spokesman' to Hitler; that Churchill did everything
the very end to do everything possible and impossible to divert Hitler, with Mussolini's collaboration, from his commitment on the Western front, in order to ward off, all together (Italians, Germans, British, and - probably - French), the communist avalanche advancing from the East; that, thanks to Churchill's letters, Mussolini was convinced that he would get away with it and, perhaps, once the initial chaos had passed, return to the political scene; that if Stalin had come into possession of that dossier, he could have immediately denounced the Yalta agreements, accusing Great Britain of treason and demanding territories far larger than Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and half of Germany. Wolff has added fuel to the fire of the 'British trail'. His documents suggest that the theory that, in the race between the Communists and the British to be the first to kill Mussolini (and Clara Petacci, who knew and held all his secrets), the British won, thanks to one of their agents infiltrating the Communist ranks, is anything but far-fetched.

The documents speak for themselves

Riciotti Lazzero, one of the most authoritative and well-documented historians of the Italian Social Republic, kept these documents in a drawer for 21 years for reasons that are unknown. Finally, he made them public in his highly successful book, *Il sacco d'Italia (The Sack of Italy*), published in 1994. Before examining these sensational documents, a premise is needed to understand them. These papers are authentic. The Germans had installed a telephone tapping center in Salò that intercepted all the Duce's conversations. They also photographed all his letters, copies of which he regularly gave to his mistress, not so much to obtain her approval as to keep her informed of his every move. And the funny thing is that Mussolini knew about it. He knew, in particular, that Claretta

passed his letters on to an SS lieutenant, his bodyguard, to have them photographed. The operation was intended to obtain more copies of the dossier. Mussolini was obsessed with the desire to distribute copies of the most important documents proving his conduct during the war to the most trusted people in his *entourage.* Among them were Petacci, Minister Carlo Alberto Biggini, Japanese Ambassador Shinrokuro Hidaka, and, of course, the lieutenant. The latter, as a good SS officer, made one more copy than expected. It was for his boss, General Wolff. This is where the documents delivered to Ricciotti Lazzero came from. Below, we can examine the contents of the most important ones in detail.

September 10, 1944. Letter from the Duce to Marshal Oraziani.
"In order to protect us all in the future, I am collecting as many written commitments and clarifications as possible. From everyone, in their own handwriting. I do not even exclude Hitler. Only the correspondence, now voluminous, will speak and break every spear aimed at us, if necessary. The mere knowledge of the resistance of my files frightens too many: from Vittorio Emanuele to Badoglio. But even Churchill, and Hitler himself, will be forced to stick to the

truth."

November 22, 1944. Telephone call between Hitler and Mussolini.
Hitler: "But there is something we can do, Duce: retaliatory measures. I was clear in the letter I just sent you."
Mussolini: "I too see no other way out. We are forced to do it. How crazy these Anglo-Saxons are! They do not understand that in this way they are digging their own grave, especially the British. Or do they believe that with their hoped-for victory they will be able to block Bolshevism at the English Channel? They are short-sighted."
Hitler: "The British are not short-sighted, they are blind! Don't they see the Russian colossus?"

Mussolini: "In truth, Churchill has foreseen this danger for years. But... Führer, you know...".
Hitler: "Yes, I know, I am aware of all the circumstances. But Duce, believe me, this sword cuts both ways. And as long as this is the case, we must not negotiate. Do you remember what I told you?"
Mussolini: "I remember, and I continue to expect your understanding. We must not miss this opportunity. Give me your trust!"
Hitler: "You have my trust, there is no doubt about that. But if I..."
[At this point, the line goes dead. This phone call clearly shows the Duce's efforts to persuade Hitler to give him ascolto, that is, to turn exclusively against the Russians and cease the counteroffensive in the West. But the despot in Berlin remains convinced that his sword has "two blades."]

January 9, 1945. Letter from Mussolini to Oraziani.
"I have a letter from Hitler dated January 2, 1945. His demand that we retreat to the north if necessary and his advice that I take with me all the documents I mentioned to him, which I proposed to use, speak for themselves. At the moment, I consider it of great importance to bring these documents to safety, first and foremost the exchange of letters and agreements with Churchill. These will be evidence of British bad faith. These documents are worth more than a won war."
[Mussolini knows he can hold Churchill in his grip, at least as long as he has the documents].

March 14, 1945. Letter from Mussolini to Claretta.
"My dear Claretta, you are right. The day is approaching when Hitler will be convinced of the need for direct negotiations with England. He knows my possibilities [clearly referring to direct contacts with Churchill]. But he is afraid, I know

I know the reason for his fear. And I curse this knowledge of mine, because it gives me the nightmare of being cowardly, of not being able to decide to act, even though I feel the absolute necessity, indeed the duty, to act, finally. However, acting in agreement with Hitler means running the risk of compromising our situation and our chance of saving what can be saved. Acting on our own initiative? Alone? It is not advisable. I do not want to follow in the footsteps of the Savoy family and other traitors! What torment! And what a crisis of conscience!"
[Here we see that Claretta Petacci was aware of every political problem facing the state, even the most delicate ones].

March 25, 1945. Telephone call with Minister Paolo Zerbino.
Zerbino: "I have carried out your orders. Three photographic copies are already ready. The material intended for that man in Italy [who is he, the Japanese ambassador?] is ready to go."
Mussolini: "Send the material to Milan immediately. Have the other copies brought here, along with the originals. The destination for the latter has already been chosen. The other two copies must be kept in different places. I will keep a few papers. You never know what might happen, and we must do everything we can to prevent even a small part of it from falling into the hands of people who have an interest in destroying or hiding it. The people I am referring to are the many Italians who did not hesitate to ally themselves with Italy's enemies in order to have an easy game twenty years later [the allusion to the CLNAI is obvious]. Imagine if these people think they will lift a finger for national prestige! These beggars have done nothing but betray: in our country and abroad!"
[Zerbino was the Minister of the Interior].

March 25, 1945. Telephone call with Alessandro Pavolini.
Mussolini: "At the moment, I believe that the most important

and useful thing to do is to keep our papers safe, especially the correspondence and documents relating to the agreements with Churchill. These papers will be the inevitable proof of the British's bad faith. These documents are worth more to Italy than a won war!"
[Pavolini was the secretary of the Fascist Party].

April 2, 1945. Letter from Claretta Petacci to Mussolini.
"My firm conviction is always the same: let's not come to terms! The Savoys, Badoglio, and their associates are setting a trap for us! To them, you are an outlaw, a man condemned to death. Listen to my advice: be on your guard! They all have an interest in silencing you forever! You say: the documents speak for themselves. But they know that documents can be bought, stolen, destroyed. One thing is certain: if you, if the correspondence, were to fall into their hands one day, your days, as well as those of the correspondence, would be numbered! Well, I beg you, don't make any decisions without consulting with those you know!"
[Who is Claretta referring to? Prudent, she does not name names. And the tragic epilogue of her life is the most dramatic confirmation of her lucidity and foresight].

April 3, 1945. Letter from Mussolini to Oraziani.
"Your proposal is absolutely senseless! Entrust the Savoy with the documents to win peace? Vittorio Emanuele has renounced me, and will continue to betray all his cronies one after the other, dismissing them after exploiting them. The Savoy will never be able to use our papers!"

April 15, 1945. Letter from Mussolini to Nicola Bombacci.
"My old and dear friend, at present, I have little left. Only our papers can be our salvation, both moral and material. Should I perish assassinated, make use of the documents!"

/ many witnesses to a denied truth

There are many Italian witnesses who have testified to contacts, meetings, and exchanges of letters between Mussolini and British agents during the months of the Italian Social Republic (and not on the eve of Italy's entry into the war or in the period immediately following).
Their accounts and testimonies have been collected in books by researchers and historians of the utmost honesty and integrity. Their names are: Dino Campini (*Strano gioco di Mussolini,* Milan 1952, and *Piazzale Loreto,* Milan, 1972), Franco Bandini (*Le ultime 95 ore di Mussolini,* Milan 1959, and *Vita e morte segreta di Mussolini,* Milan 1978), Alessandro Zanella (*L'ora di Dongo,* Milan 1993), Fabio Andriola (*Appuntamento sul lago,* Milan 1990, and *Mussolini-Churchill carteggio segreto,* Casale Monferrato 1996), Arrigo Petacco (*Dear Benito, Dear Winston,* Milan, 1985), Giorgio Cavalieri (*Shadows on the Lake,* Casale Monferrato 1995), Roberto Festorazzi (*Mussolini-Churchill: The Secret Papers,* Milan, 1998). In the author's opinion, the book that most completely and rigorously reconstructs the secret relations between the Duce and the British Prime Minister remains *Mussolini-Churchill carteggio segreto,* by Fabio Andriola.
Alongside these texts (now classics on the subject), there are a myriad of diaries, memoirs, and interviews—always from the Italian side—in which more or less detailed references are made to the secret Italian-British relations that took place at the end of the conflict. Curiously, this impressive body of literature is considered by all British authors to be worthless. For them, it is madness to even hypothesize that there were any relations other than those of war between Winston Churchill and the man he had, on more than one occasion, called 'the great devil' or 'the beast'.
False trail: the documents of 1940

Unfortunately, part of the Italian literature on the subject plays into the snobbery of British researchers. Specifically, the part that places the correspondence exclusively in the months leading up to Italy's entry into the war on June 10, 1940, when Churchill would have tried in every way to avoid Italian involvement in the conflict by promising, in exchange for Mussolini's neutrality, territorial compensation not only to Italy but also to France and Spain. June 10, 1940, when Churchill allegedly tried in every way to avoid Italian involvement in the conflict by promising, in exchange for Mussolini's neutrality, territorial compensation not only to the detriment of Great Britain (Malta and Gibraltar), but even to the detriment of France (Nice, Savoy, Tunisia) and other nations (Yugoslavia and Greece).

According to other sources, who claim to be familiar with the contents of the correspondence, Churchill did write to Mussolini during those months, but in a diametrically opposite vein: that is, urging him to enter a war that was expected to end quickly with the inevitable victory of Germany, in order to mitigate Hitler's demands at the peace table: in short, to control the Nazi dictator, over whom Mussolini had always exercised undoubted influence.

On these issues, there are recent revelations that in 1998, a former police officer now aged 84, Luigi Carissimi-Priori, made to the avid historical researcher and passionate journalist from Como, Roberto Festorazzi. Luigi Carissimi-Priori, a former member of the defunct Action Party and former head of the political office of the Como Police Headquarters in the aftermath of the Liberation, emigrated shortly after those events. Having become an engineer and spent almost his entire life abroad, he returned to his homeland in the autumn of his life, disappointed like no other - judging by his conversations with Festorazzi - with the Italy 'born of the Resistance', and determined not to hand over to the national archives what

circumstances had allowed him to come into possession of: copies of the correspondence (or rather, part of the correspondence) between Mussolini and Churchill.

Another, therefore, who believed he could make private use of documents belonging to the history of Italy. But let's get to the point. According to what the old engineer tells Festorazzi, the Mussolini-Churchill correspondence, stolen from the Duce at the time of his arrest and ending up in the hands of the secretary of the Pei in Como, was "sold to the British, in agreement with the party, which ordered him to reproduce the material before delivery, in order to send it to the central archives in Botteghe Oscure." At that very time, Carissimi-Priori, in his capacity as a police officer, was tasked with investigating 'the shooting of Mussolini and the disappearance of the Dongo treasure'. And during this investigation, Festorazzi reveals, he came across a copy of the documents. What did he do? He hid them "in a safe place" and now, at the age of 84, he promises that "they will be published abroad in due course," adding: "I will facilitate the return of these materials to their rightful owners, namely the British." And the Italians? He does not consider them at all, it seems. Not unlike the many partisans who took part in the events in Dongo and who wrote memoirs "to be made public after their death." Evidently, they all have something to hide and care little about serving their country.

Festorazzi nevertheless deserves credit for lifting another veil on the unspeakable shame of Dongo: the shame of the Duce's "executioners," the shame of the Resistance Institutes which, years later, continue to cover up the truth, despite being funded by the state, and therefore by the citizens, who want to know their history. And the most important question remains pressing: what do Churchill's letters to the Duce contain?

Carissimi-Priori replies: "In his letters to the Duce in 1940, Churchill went out on a limb with his offers to Italy in exchange for maintaining its neutrality. The British prime minister promised Mussolini significant territorial concessions, such as possession of Dalmatia and definitive possession of the Greek Dodecanese islands and all colonies (including Ethiopia), as well as the incorporation of Tunisia and the 'reconquest' of Nice."

In one of the letters - again according to Carissimi-Priori's revelations - the British statesman was very explicit in assuring that the British would pay special attention to Italy's western border *('your western borderline',* the engineer specifies).

Carissimi-Priori, however, rules out that, in any of the letters that make up the correspondence, Churchill asked Italy to enter the war alongside Germany in order to try to mitigate Hitler's claims. On the contrary, Churchill did exactly the opposite: he tried, by every means possible, to bring Fascist Italy into the arms of the Allies. Finally, Carissimi-Priori rules out that the two statesmen continued to write to each other after Italy entered the war.

He says no more: as revelations, they are somewhat disappointing. Festorazzi must have realized this too, as he tries to extract something from the former police officer about the end of Mussolini and Petacci. He obtains—and this seems to us the most intriguing part of the book—the admission that things did not go at all as the state culture, subservient to the communist "vulgate" and still ready to crush anyone who tries to dismantle it, claims. In short, Mussolini and Petacci were not lined up in front of the gate of Villa Belmonte in front of a firing squad, nor were they 'executed' with the solemnity appropriate to the moment 'in the name of the Italian people', but killed like animals.

Well, how can we be surprised if, in light of these premises, a young British historian named Nicholas Farrell was able to write a mocking and ironic report entitled *The Conspiracy Factory?* Let's read the most significant parts: 'Let's suppose that Churchill and Mussolini were really corresponding by letter. Why then would Churchill have set up an

operation to find and destroy the letters? What was so enormously embarrassing about offering pieces of French territory and a handful of Mediterranean islands? Well, it might have caused a little embarrassment, but not enough to keep Churchill awake at night. And yet, Italian historians and journalists would have us believe that he was so terrified by the prospect of everything coming to light that he personally traveled to Italy, first to Como, then to Lake Garda, and finally to Venice, for five years in a row, with the specific intention of recovering the letters by any means necessary; and even ordering Her Majesty's spies to comb the peninsula to get hold of the correspondence, whatever the cost. In reality, Churchill and Mussolini never wrote to each other, except for that one famous exchange of letters in 1940, when the Englishman urged the Italian in vain to stay out of the conflict.
Inexceptionable. Intelligent. Cunning. Well written. In other words, everything aimed at limiting Mussolini-Churchill contacts to 1940 and making them the subject of the plausible, highly probable offer of territories to Italy in exchange for its renunciation of entering the war. Is it really something to be ashamed of, to the point of killing the Duce (and, while we're at it, his mistress too) so that they wouldn't reveal that distant, useless offer? And what harm would it do to Churchill's honor (perhaps a little less to his political acumen) if unlikely letters from the British prime minister were to surface with an exhortation to Mussolini
solini saying something like: "Please, enter the war. You will get away with few deaths, you will curb the Führer's expansionist ambitions, and I will know how to reward you"?
In reality, the slight embarrassment that any letters of the above-described tenor might have caused Churchill in 1945 had already been largely overcome in December 1940, when Churchill broadcast a radio message to the Italians pointing to Mussolini as "the only person responsible for Italy's entry into the war." And completely forgotten in the dramatic radio address of November 29, 1942, after Italy's defeat at El Alamein: "One man, one man alone, is responsible for the ruin of the Italian people. We did our best to persuade him to remain neutral. But he did not listen to us." Words that should definitively close the debate on the "correspondence of 1940."

1944-1945: the burning contacts

There are other documents, papers, and testimonies that make the "British trail" in the murder of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci more plausible than ever.
Very appropriately, in his fundamental study, Fabio Andriola recalls that on May 10, 1945, Churchill wrote to Field Marshal Alexander asking him to order an investigation into Mussolini's death and, in particular, into why Petacci had also been killed. In that letter, the prime minister went so far as to describe Colonel Valerio's action as "treacherous and cowardly." The CLNAI (National Liberation Committee of Upper Italy) had just taken responsibility for that execution. The CLNAI acted in the name and on behalf of the Bonomi government, the government of Lieutenant Umberto di Savoia. The shame of that 'act of justice', or of that double murder, depending on one's point of view, therefore fell on the weak government, on the weak sovereign of Rome. Who could ever have suspected British loyalty? It was as well to wear the

double murder, depending on your point of view, therefore fell on the weak government, on the weak sovereign of Rome. Who could ever have suspected British loyalty? It was like wearing the clothes of a knight of the Round Table.
Nine years later, in the fall of 1954, a nephew of Mussolini, Vanni Teodorani, was the first to put forward, in the weekly magazine *Asso di bastoni*, which he edited, the hypothesis that the British had a hand in Mussolini's death. Churchill did not deign to take that poor and desperate fascist paper into consideration. Instead, he reacted with a flat denial to an investigation published in March 1947 in *the Giornale d'Italia,* denying that he had ever written letters to Mussolini other than those published in his books. Then, once again prime minister, he ordered the Foreign Office, on November 7, 1951, to issue a statement with similar content following new reports that appeared in the Italian press.
We can only speculate about the nature of the contacts (a more appropriate term than 'correspondence') between Mussolini and Churchill from the autumn of 1944 until the fall of Salò. In other words, we can debate whether the initiative to reopen dialogue came from the Italian or the English side. According to Fabio Andriola, 'in 1944, two factors could have led Mussolini and Churchill to reopen the channel of dialogue: on the one hand, the Red Army's advance into Europe and the need to stem the tide of new Soviet imperialism; on the other, Mussolini's extreme political and military weakness may have led him to put heavy pressure on the British prime minister, who was

vulnerable to blackmail because of his proposals a few years earlier, in order to obtain non-humiliating peace terms." Therefore, the initiative may have come from Mussolini.
However, it is equally plausible that it originated with the British, precisely in an attempt to halt the advance of the What did Mussolini have to offer? The surrender of the Italian Social Republic, for whatever it was worth, and although it was impossible without the consent of the German occupiers? Churchill, on the other hand, could promise much more if the Duce's attempts to convince the Führer to cease resistance in the West had led to any results.
It is a fact that, although there is no tangible evidence of these contacts, there are many—too many—testimonies attesting to them. Here we will limit ourselves to mentioning the main ones.
Dino Campini (we will return to him in the chapter dedicated to Minister Carlo Alberto Biggini, of whom he was the secretary in Padua) spent the entire second half of his life, starting from the Liberation, racking his brains over what he had learned from the minister. He wrote dozens of articles on the subject (he contributed to the weekly magazine *Tempo* and other important publications) and two books (*Strano gioco di Mussolini,* Milan 1952, and *Piazzale Loreto,* Milan 1972) obsessively dedicated to the role played by Churchill in the final days of the fascist republican regime. Biggini had repeatedly and continuously hinted at the Duce's moves to shorten the war and spare his men suffering. Those moves were directed at the British, and Biggini was kept constantly informed by Mussolini, who trusted him unconditionally. In his last days, with Campini secretly visiting him in the Milan clinic where he was dying under a false name, Biggini continued to lament the loss of the copy of the secret documents given to him by the Duce. "And it was clear from his words," Campini recounts, "that these were not Hitler's secrets, but Churchill's. From the context of the conversations, from many phrases, from increasingly precise indications, it became increasingly clear to me that the documents that concerned him were those relating to the relations between Italy and England, between Mussolini and Churchill."
Two other important testimonies, which are worth quoting in full, are those of Sergio Nesi, an officer of the Decima Mas, and Pietro Carradori, the Duce's attendant.

Nesi: a meeting on the lake†

"But probably the most important contact took place in November 1944, not between individual emissaries from the South and Borghese, but at a much higher level. The author is not aware of any historian or journalist ever having mentioned this top-secret contact, and the event has only recently come to light. The location of the meeting was Lake Iseo, more precisely the base of the Decima Mas flotilla. It should be noted that the Decima had established a base on that lake at the Montecolino seaplane base, where the Cabi had installed a pier for testing torpedoes, and that the family of Commander Borghese lived on the island of San Paolo [owned by the Beretta family], almost opposite the seaplane base. To those unfamiliar with the Navy, it may seem strange that there could be a seaplane base at the foot of the Alps, but until September 8, 1943, there was a Royal Navy aerial observation school at that seaplane base, and there were three Cant Z 501 seaplanes. On the morning of September 9, the planes took off and moved to Venice, while all the personnel left for the same destination by land. The administrative commander of the base was Major Barsali of the Royal Army, who, after leaving the seaplane base, also went to Venice to the base on the island of Sant'Erasmo, near the Sant'Andrea air base, the former silo.

When he was told that he would have to leave for the south and surrender to the Anglo-Americans, anticipating Fecia di Cossato's gesture, he wrote a letter to his family ("I will not go over to the enemy") and shot himself.
Returning to the contact in question, it is necessary to examine Commander Borghese's movements during those days in November. On the 7th, he had a long private conversation with Oraziani. On the 14th, escorted by several marines and Lieutenant Enzo Tartaglia, he went to see the German ambassador Rahn in a town on Lake Como and in the evening he reached the Montorfano detachment. The following day, he was in the vicinity of Como, specifically at the base of the Vega battalion specialists. On the 16th, a Decima motorboat piloted by marine Caviglia, from Sarnico, picked up Commander Borghese and Donna Daria Olsufieff [the commander's wife] from the island of San Paolo and took them to the Montecolino base. For several days, all access roads to the area had been blocked by German soldiers, as local Resistance figures and historians still recall today. The command building was surrounded by an armed

† Sergio Nesi's testimony is taken from his book *Decima flottiglia nostra,* Milan 1986, and more specifically from the chapter in which he recounts the secret relations between the Decima Mas and the authorities in the south.

detachment of marines from the Decima (blue insignia) under the command of Lieutenant Enzo Tartaglia. Shortly thereafter, the participants in that top-secret meeting arrived, chaired by Commander Borghese, who did the honors: Captain Fausto Sestini for the Ministry of the Republican Navy; General Giuseppe Violante, commander of the Etna Division of the GNR; Movm Francesco Maria Barracu for the Government of the RSI; German Ambassador Rahn; SS Obergruppenführer Karl Wolff; senior British officers, plenipotentiaries representing Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery; senior American officers, plenipotentiaries of their government and General Eisenhower; other minor figures. The sole interpreter was Donna Daria.

The conference had been requested by Churchill himself, and his plenipotentiaries were bearers of a top-secret plan by the British statesman, which, if it had been followed through, would have reversed the fortunes of the war and changed the face of the world.

The proposals were as follows:

1) official recognition of the Italian Social Republic and a simultaneous armistice with that state;
2) reversal of the front, with the forces of the 5th American Army and the 8th British Army attacking the eastern front against Russia;
3) exploitation of German forces operating in Italy in support of the Allied forces;
4) intervention of the four Italian divisions of the RSI, Littorio, Monterosa, Italia, and San Marco, as well as the Decima, in coordination with the aforementioned armies.

When Commander Borghese asked why the Allies did not want to involve the armed forces of the Kingdom of the South, the British replied that they could not rely on that government, given the presence within it of too many men linked to Russia in the name of communist ideology. That response closely mirrored the one given in the South to the commanders of those clandestine volunteers who were supposed to carry out the landing in Trieste and Istria. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the so-called "De Courten plan" [which provided for full cooperation between the men of the Decima who remained in the South and those operating in the North] was nothing more than an appendix to the broader plan devised by Churchill and Montgomery: those 5,000 clandestine volunteers of Mastrago- stino and Cigala-Fulgosi would probably have had to join an operation [against Tito] on the front of Venezia Giulia, Friuli, and Istria, together with the 10,000 of the Decima already deployed there.

The discussion in that room in Montecolino must certainly have been lively, but nothing leaked out beyond the initial remarks mentioned above, filtered through a half-open door, except for the American plenipotentiaries' absolutely negative opinion of the plan. Roosevelt and Eisenhower did not want to break with their "friend Stalin," whom they held in the highest esteem, with whom they were deeply friendly, and in whose good faith they believed blindly. Furthermore, they could not throw away the Yalta agreements. The meeting thus ended in a stalemate. However, something must have been written, and perhaps Churchill, among other papers, searched for those testimonies that were so compromising for him in the immediate post-war period. The most impenetrable silence covered this event for almost half a century. Now this window has opened.

Fantasy? Invention? Novelistic reality? And to what end? In Sergio Nesi's memoir, the details of the meeting on Lake Iseo were of marginal importance. Nesi is not a 'conspiracy theorist', he is a witness of the era, a volunteer of the Decima who simply wrote the history of 'the Italian Navy's assault vehicles in the South and North after the armistice', as the title page of his book states. But let's continue with the second testimony announced: the intriguing one from Mussolini's attendant.

*Carradori: two secret meetings and a great fear of the British**

"In the last months of the Italian Social Republic, Mussolini dealt with British agents sent by Winston Churchill. I witnessed

* Excerpt from the chapter *Però questi inglesi (But these* British) from Pietro Carradori's memoir *Vita col Duce* (Life with the Duce) (Milan 2001), edited by Luciano Garibaldi.

at least two meetings, top secret and highly confidential, that the Duce had with these mysterious characters. Both took place in a villa located at Via Roma 5 (at least, that was the name of the street at the time, as I noted) in Porto Ceresio, in the province of Varese, a few hundred meters from the Swiss border. The first meeting took place on the evening of

September 21, 1944. We left Gargnano at 8:30 p.m., exiting through the back door to evade the surveillance of Birzer, the German SS lieutenant who had orders not to lose sight of Mussolini for even a moment. Mussolini detested Birzer, and I had more than once pushed him aside with a few unkind shoves to make him understand that his presence was not at all welcome. Four of us got into the car: in the front, myself and the driver Cesarotti, in the back, the Duce and Nicola Bombacci, his communist friend, the only one in Salò who addressed him informally. The journey there was silent, and it took a good two hours to reach our destination. Mussolini had a yellow leather bag with a zipper and no handle with him, the same bag that he would later give me—recommending it as the most precious thing he had—when he left the Prefecture of Milan on April 25, 1945.

When we arrived in front of the villa, Cesarotti and I stayed in the car, while Mussolini and Bombacci went inside. I never saw the British, who had arrived—as the driver and I guessed—by rowboat or motorboat from nearby Switzerland, landing at the back of the villa. It was clear to me that they were British from the half-phrases that the Duce and Bombacci exchanged on the return journey, which began shortly after midnight. Mussolini spoke openly about the British, commenting to Bombacci on their harshness, clearly disappointed that things had not gone as he had expected.

I heard the same comments, the same judgments marked by disappointment and spite, like those of someone who had failed to conclude a deal that was particularly important to him, in his voice on the night
between January 21 and 22, 1945, upon his return from a similar, equally secret trip to Porto Ceresio. On that occasion, the Duce was accompanied by Francesco Maria Barracu, and once again he carried the dark yellow bag with him. Much later, I connected those two strange trips to some journeys that Mussolini had made in the previous months, accompanied by Marshal Apriliti, to the island of San Paolo, owned by the Beretta family, on Lake Iseo. The industrialist Beretta, Italy's leading manufacturer of small arms, was on almost friendly terms with Mussolini, but not only with him. For example, he hosted Commander Borghese's wife, Mrs. Daria Olsufieff, and her children in his luxurious villa on the island. Beretta often came to Gargnano, even twice a month. When he manufactured the famous short submachine gun, he personally brought us two examples: one for the Duce and one for me. The one for the Duce had Mussolini's M in gold on the butt of the stock. On mine, the M was in silver. At the time, I thanked Beretta. I could not have imagined that he was supplying the partisans with submachine guns and pistols with the same generosity. After all, that is the job of arms manufacturers: to maintain good relations with all the belligerents. Evidently, including the British. To the point of arranging meetings at his home with the head of the Fascist Republic.

One can make—and has made and continues to make—the most daring hypotheses about the content of the negotiations between Mussolini and the British. I can offer a small but reliable piece of direct testimony. Mussolini was afraid of falling into British hands in Gargnano. He knew he would not escape, that they would kill him. I do not know why, although I can imagine: to silence him so that he would not divulge the nature of those negotiations, which were evidently being conducted behind the Russians' backs. I only know that more than once, almost talking to himself, I heard him fear the risk of ending up a prisoner of the British.

Yet things had not always been that way. Shortly before we entered the war, I myself introduced a British commission, which included the ambassador to Italy, into the globe room at Palazzo Venezia. After the talks, some members of the delegation asked Quinto Navarra if they could take some ashtrays from the anteroom as *souvenirs*, offering to pay for them. Navarra replied that they were free to take whatever they wanted. One of them replied on behalf of the others: "Italians don't realize they have a leader who is much greater than themselves. For us, taking home a souvenir of Mr. Mussolini is an honor."

Shinrokuro Hidaka: ambassador does not bring punishment

Once again: fantasy? Novelistic reality? And to what end? In reality, these statements correspond perfectly to the political-strategic picture of that period of World War II, which could not fail to see Churchill and Mussolini agreeing to put an end to the massacre in the West and to curb the communist advance; Hitler (due to his fanatical unreasonableness) and Stalin (the real victim of the maneuver) were kept in the dark about these contacts for obvious reasons; the Americans were hesitant and ultimately responsible for the failure of the plan. Nor is it surprising that German commanders in Italy were aware of the contacts, as they were as eager as Churchill to end the war and save their own skins.

Moreover, there are countless confirmations of these secret relations, aimed—there is no other possible explanation—at tripping up the Red Army to save Europe from communism.
Among the most convincing is that contained in the book *Roma, Berlino, Salò* (Milan, 1950) by Filippo Anfuso, to whom Mus

solini confided, when appointing him undersecretary for foreign affairs, that he had tried to mediate between Churchill and Hitler in a vain search for an agreement that would put an end to the carnage in the West, but that he had always had to contend with Hitler's hostility to the project ("When you talk to Hitler about England, it's as if he's been bitten by an asp!").
Ermanno Amicucci, editor of *Corriere della Sera* and therefore in close confidence with Mussolini, also mentions this in his book *I 600 giorni di Mussolini* (Rome, 1948), where he reports on repeated meetings between Mussolini—who would have traveled there alone, driving a "Balilla"—and British emissaries in a villa near Brescia. These meetings are said to have begun on June 14, 1944.
Alfredo Cucco, Undersecretary for Popular Culture, mentions them in his *Non volevamo perdere* (We Didn't Want to Lose, Bologna, 1950), where he reconstructs more than one meeting on the island of San Paolo between Mussolini (who was accompanied only by his aide-de-camp, Colonel Vito Casalinuovo, later shot in Dongo) and two British emissaries who lived in Maderno. According to Cucco, the meetings took place in June and July and were interrupted after the assassination attempt on Hitler on July 20, 1944, which threw the top German representatives in Italy, from Wolff to Rahn, into an understandable state of concern.
After the war, the undersecretary of the RSI Air Force, General Ruggero Bonomi, confirmed these meetings to Dino Campini, the former secretary of Minister Biggini, who was constantly seeking confirmation of the nature of the correspondence handed over by the Duce to his favorite minister. Moreover, the fact that these documents contained a complete reconstruction of the contacts and agreements between the Italian leader and the British prime minister during the RSI was no mystery to many other witnesses of the time: from Edmondo Cione, the philosopher commissioned by the Duce to create a political party to give the RSI a democratic appearance
the Italian Social Republic (he discusses this in his *Storia della Rsi,* Rome, 1951), to Nino d'Aroma, director of the Istituto Luce, who was tasked by Mussolini with procuring, with the utmost discretion, three photographic copies of a correspondence consisting of about two hundred sheets. D'Aroma reveals in his *Vite parallele: Churchill e Mussolini* (Rome, 1962) that those sheets, which passed through his hands but were not spied on out of loyalty and discretion, nevertheless referred to secret contacts with Churchill and his emissaries.
Many of these witnesses also remember the recipients of at least two of the copies of the correspondence: Minister Biggini and the Japanese ambassador Shinrokuro Hidaka, whom the Duce considered a loyal friend. It is likely that Mussolini wanted to keep the third copy for himself, having decided to keep the originals safe in Switzerland. The 'trusted man' who, when the dust had settled, was supposed to reveal the papers, at least in Mussolini's opinion, was Hirohito's ambassador, whom the Duce, in a conversation with Nino D'Aroma at the end of February 1945, had described as 'a gentleman, a friend of ours and of Italy', adding: "In recent months, I have studied his character closely and I am sure I have chosen the right man. At the appropriate time, once the period of struggle and persecution is over, these papers must absolutely see the light of day." They never did. Instead, they ended up in the hands of those they were meant to end up with: the British.
It is impossible not to agree with Fabio Andriola's scathing judgment of the Japanese diplomat, quoted here in full from his book *Mussolini-Churchill, carteggio segreto (Mussolini-Churchill, secret correspondence):* "Due to that morbid attachment to confidentiality that makes diplomats a veritable caste, seemingly designed to unnecessarily complicate the work of those who must reconstruct the events in which they played a leading or supporting role, Hidaka was always very tight-lipped after the war: he repeatedly denied
denied on several occasions that he was in possession (but only 'in possession' at the time the question was asked) of documents entrusted to him by Mussolini, but he went so far as to claim that he had never been to Bern, the seat of the Japanese embassy in Switzerland, after 1943. It was precisely at the embassy in Bern, after the war had ended, that the Mussolini family, while Hidaka had been in the hands of the Allies since the previous April, sent a courier from Chiasso to collect what Hidaka had deposited there. However, the response was negative: the Japanese claimed to have destroyed everything in the imminence of Japan's unconditional surrender. [...] For his part, Hidaka, for some

reason, did not spend long in captivity and, after being acquitted in a war crimes trial for crimes relating to the Japanese occupation of China, was able to resume his service in the Japanese diplomatic corps, a unique case among Japanese diplomats involved in the war. As an international inspector, Hidaka was the first Japanese diplomat to be granted permission by the US government to inspect the various Japanese consulates in the United States. After that, Mussolini's former right-hand man decided to leave politics and take over the presidency of a major heating company. [...] When questioned upon his return to Japan about Mussolini's papers and diaries, Hidaka denied any knowledge of those documents. [...] Later, the Mussolini family tried in vain to bring the former ambassador to trial, but Hidaka clearly had too much support to come out unscathed from this eventual trial.

A vivid description of Baron Shinrokuro Hidaka is provided by Piero Buscaroli, a historian and journalist who published an account of his meeting with Hidaka in Tokyo on Wednesday, July 6, 1966, in the daily newspaper *Il Giornale* in October 1995. During the long interview, which lasted an entire day, the former ambassador told Buscaroli all the background details of July 25, 1943, the day that marked the fall of fascism. The Duce, Hidaka recounted, had been informed by his staff that the Italian military and police forces were in a state of panic.

day, the former ambassador told Buscaroli all the background to July 25, 1943, the day that marked the fall of fascism. The Duce, Hidaka said, hoped to obtain, through him, the mediation of Tokyo (which was not at war with Moscow) to conclude an armistice with the Russians after the defeat at Stalingrad. But, the former ambassador continued, the conspiracy of the Grand Council and King Victor Emmanuel III thwarted Mussolini's plan, who was now ready to give Hitler an *ultimatum* in order to achieve his goal.

Hidaka, Buscaroli recalls, 'spoke clear Italian'. Buscaroli frantically filled two notebooks with notes but decided to keep them to himself, locking them in a drawer, embittered and disgusted by the behaviour of Italian journalism and historiography: "Since I had noticed for years how news, truths, or revelations published in *Il Borghese* or *Il Roma* fell on deaf ears and were met with silence, except for a small group of loyal readers, I decided to keep the two notebooks in which I had transcribed my conversations with Hidaka, to be developed at a more opportune time."

When he finally decided to make them public, almost thirty years later, he attracted the interest of the most serious scholars, who eagerly threw themselves into reading those "articles," which were written in an impeccable style. This brought to light the dramatic mistake made by the conspirators of July 25, 1943, as well as confirming Mussolini's esteem for the Japanese baron ("He once told me that he considered me his only friend among those around him, Italians and Germans alike"). But, after talking for hours about his relationship with the Duce, 'Hidaka', notes a seemingly disappointed Buscaroli, 'gets up; I try to pick up the conversation again, asking him if it is true that Mussolini had entrusted him with his famous secret documents, or part of them. The smile returns, melancholic and mannered: 'It's too soon to talk about that... Perhaps after my death'.

Between Churchill and Hitler, the Duce as mediator... failed

To complete the picture of the testimonies too casually ignored by traditional historiography, it is interesting to reproduce a passage from the book by Mussolini's German doctor, Georg Zachariae *(Mussolini si confessa,* Milan, 1948), appropriately retrieved by Fabio Andriola. During one of the many confidential conversations that took place between the doctor and his illustrious ulcer patient towards the end of December 1944, Mussolini said: "I know Churchill very well, I know him personally, intimately. When he came to see me, he was not part of the government. He had come to Rome as a private citizen and wanted to be considered and treated as such. I must tell you straight away, in all honesty, that I always greatly enjoyed my conversations with this intelligent and very English man of the world, despite our differences of opinion and certain divergent points of view. I can say that we became friends during those days. [...] Even during the war, I made it known to the German government on several occasions that I was sure I could reach a reasonable agreement with England. I think this would have been possible because I intended to use my personal relationship with Churchill as a basis. Ribbentrop [Foreign Minister of the Third Reich] could never have achieved such a thing. I know the Prime Minister and I know how to talk to him. [...]. Such a meeting could have been or could still be arranged anywhere, in Spain or North Africa. Churchill is not a narrow-minded man. His intelligence and experience as a statesman are too vast for him not to be able to correctly assess the advantages of an agreement in the interests of England and Europe. I can tell you this: I was ready to take such a step, to promote an agreement with Churchill. Hitler did not want to and does not want to. He prefers to listen to that incompetent Ribbentrop.

meeting with Churchill. Hitler did not want it and still does not want it. He prefers to listen to that incompetent

Ribbentrop.
And that's not all. For example, the regime's historians were too quick to dismiss the revelations of Drew Pearson, an American journalist who, in 1945, moved like a true professional between Rome and Lake Como and who, on one particular occasion, while investigating the escape from Rome of General Mario Roatta, claimed that he had fled with the complicity of the British, who were "afraid that he would reveal the compromising correspondence between Churchill and Mussolini.".
The author of this book, who was bound to Alessandro Zanella, the tenacious historian from Mantua who died prematurely on May 22, 2000, by a fraternal friendship, collaborated with him for a long time, conducting research, investigating, interviewing witnesses of the time, consulting correspondence, and writing reports. In his seminal *work L'ora di Dongo (The Hour of Dongo),* Alessandro Zanella reconstructed Mussolini's summons of notary Umberto Alberici to the Prefecture in Milan on April 23, 1945, to finalize the sale of *the* Palazzo *del Popolo d'Italia* to industrialist Cella. This reconstruction includes a confidence that the notary himself allegedly made to Cella. This confidence was not compromising, but fundamental to the plot of this book: "Among the most important files that the Duce entrusted me with keeping is his correspondence with Churchill. The latter begged Mussolini to intercede with Hitler in order to prevent him from signing a separate peace with Stalin. Mussolini succeeded, and this saved Great Britain, sparing it the terrible consequences of a war waged by the Führer against a single front, the Western front." Probably, as Fabio Andriola notes, the notary Alberici glanced at the papers to authenticate them, but he certainly did not keep them in his office until the end. In any case, as a proper professional, he soon forgot their contents.
Manlio Candrilli: an innocent dead man accuses

This was also because those who did not forget risked a bad end - like 'Captain Neri' and 'Gianna' - or execution by firing squad. Yes, execution by firing squad. This was the fate of the police chief of Brescia, Manlio Candrilli, 'executed' on September 1, 1945, by a firing squad made up of carabinieri at the Mompiano shooting range, under the cold and impassive gaze of an officer of His Britannic Majesty.
The author of this book met the police chief's son, Giancarlo Candrilli, in Rome in 1982, while conducting research at the State Archives to write the biography of Carlo Alberto Biggini. Candrilli, who since he was a boy had fought alongside his mother to prove his father's innocence and the brutality of his execution, and had succeeded thanks to a review ruling handed down 14 years after the events by the Court of Cassation, hoped that something would come to light that would corroborate the 'English trail' in his father's death, just as I was looking for traces of an 'English connection' in Biggini's mysterious death. Nothing came of it. No evidence, in short. But the suspicions remained. Candrilli was the only police chief of the Italian Social Republic to be shot, due to pressure exerted by British agents on the Special Court of Assizes in Brescia, which had unjustly sentenced him to death. Candrilli had been the police chief of Brescia, the province that had had the privilege—or misfortune—of hosting the most sensitive offices of the Italian Social Republic, but above all, the territory where the secret meetings between Mussolini and Churchill's men had taken place. Candrilli had watched over those meetings to ensure the safety of the head of state and other prominent figures involved. He knew the faces and roles, if not the names, of the participants and was a key witness to a story that had to be erased from history.
The Brescian historian Lodovico Galli, in his book *Una vile esecuzione* (Brescia, 2001), meticulously documented the inconsistency and falsity of the accusations against Candrilli and the utter injustice of his death sentence. Candrilli, well known to the entire population for his meekness, kindness, and inclination toward pacification, was arrested following false accusations written against him by former collaborators who had gone over to the service of the victors. Immediately after his arrest, he was beaten to a pulp. He asked in vain for well-known local anti-fascists whom he had helped during the civil war to be heard in his defense. All the lawyers, both public and private, appointed to defend him declined the assignment "for health reasons": a tragicomedy. But what were the charges? Two, Galli recalls: ordering the execution of a partisan, who had instead been hit by machine-gun fire during an escape attempt; and torturing a woman who appeared before the judges showing scars on her body. Candrilli had never seen or known that woman, and those scars turned out to be the remains of a smallpox infection.

"A sword that cuts both ways"

Among the telephone calls made from Mussolini's telephone in Villa delle Orsoline, intercepted and transcribed by Wolff's German guards, and published in Ricciotti Lazzero's providential book, it is worth "re-listening" to the one "about the sword that cuts both ways," dated November 22, 1944. On the phone are the Duce and the Führer. The latter is preparing the Ardennes counteroffensive, which will go down in history as "Hitler's last gasp." The Italian dictator knows nothing about these preparations. He is bitter and disheartened by the continuous Allied bombings that are claiming victims among the

and are demoralizing the population. But let us transcribe their words once again:
Hitler: "There is something to be done, Duce: retaliatory measures. I was clear in the letter I just sent you."
Mussolini: "I too see no other way out. We are forced to do it. How crazy these Anglo-Saxons are! They do not understand that in this way they are digging their own grave, especially the British. Or do they believe that with their hoped-for victory they will be able to block Bolshevism at the English Channel? They are short-sighted."
Hitler: "The British are not short-sighted, they are blind! Don't they see the Russian colossus?"
Mussolini: "In truth, Churchill has already foreseen this danger for years. But... Führer, you know..."
Hitler: "Yes, I know, I am aware of all the circumstances. But Duce, believe me, this sword cuts both ways. And as long as this is the case, we must not negotiate. Do you remember what I told you?"
Mussolini: "I remember, and I continue to expect your understanding. We must not miss this opportunity. Give me your trust!"
Hitler: "You have my trust, there is no doubt about that. But if I...".
At this point, the line went dead. When it came back, the rest of the conversation was not transcribed due to some technical problem. But there is enough to understand what was at stake. Military operations, not only on the Eastern Front but also on the Western Front, were taking a turn for the worse for Germany. Mussolini continued to press for a way out with Churchill. At that moment, he was the supplicant. But within a few weeks, Churchill would once again be the supplicant. Hitler was in fact about to become a serious threat again, thanks to the Ardennes counteroffensive. Here is the chronology, taken from the book *Un secolo di guerre (Century of War* in the American edition), which the author wrote for White Star (Vercelli, New York, Frankfurt, 2001):
After the liberation of Paris, the Allied advance continued relentlessly. On August 21, 1944, Marseille fell, followed by Rouen on August 30. On September 3, British columns liberated Brussels, and on September 11, the Allies reached the German border. Here they were forced to stop, faced with the fortifications of the West Wall and the strenuous German resistance that made every attempt to break through futile. The only breach was opened on October 21, 1944, with the capture of Aachen, but at the cost of heavy losses. The advance, which had seemed unstoppable, had come to a halt.
Hitler was able to breathe a sigh of relief and dream that the game was not yet lost. Operation Greif was devised by OKW strategists in the hope of repeating the success of 1940. The positions had in fact returned to square one, when the German army, applying Von Manstein's plan, had broken through the enemy front, penetrating the Ardennes and encircling the British Expeditionary Force in Belgian territory. It is true that things had changed since then: the enemy's forces, with the arrival of the Americans, had almost doubled, and the German army, with the humiliations and defeats suffered after D-Day, had lost its former boldness. But the imperative to defend the homeland in danger could still work miracles.
The operation, which would go down in history as "Hitler's last stand," was prepared in every detail. German soldiers with a perfect knowledge of English were infiltrated behind enemy lines to sow confusion among the Allies with false reports of attacks on their units, blow up bridges, and spread panic: they were the "werewolves." The attack was launched on December 16, and for over a month, a savage war was fought in the snow and ice, with the Allies retreating across the entire front and the Germans advancing over a hundred kilometers.
Panic began to spread among the Allied high command, and it was not ruled out that the "last gasp" could succeed in throwing the invaders back into the sea.
the invaders back into the sea. It was probably during these weeks that Churchill secretly urged Mussolini to intervene and convince Hitler to abandon the counteroffensive in the West in order to concentrate all his forces against the inexorable advance of the Red Army, which threatened to conquer the whole of Europe. This is evidenced by the recordings of the Duce's desperate, albeit unsuccessful, telephone calls to the Führer.

The offensive in the Ardennes could have ended in catastrophe for the Allies had it not been for the desperate resistance of Bastogne, surrounded by German armored troops. The battle was one of the bloodiest of the entire Second World War and marked the end of 'Operation Greif'. On January 20, 1945, General Patton, at the head of three armored divisions, began to drive the Germans back from their conquered positions.

A glance at the dates helps to understand the interplay between Churchill and Mussolini. If one feels weak, he begs the other to do something; if he feels strong, he makes the other beg. Thus, the meetings at Lake Iseo, which took place after June 6, 1944 (the Normandy landings) until July 20 (the assassination attempt on Hitler), saw Mussolini and the German leaders in Italy (now distant from the Führer) pressing for an agreement. But the reasonable suspicion of British involvement in the Von Stauffenberg operation scuppered the negotiations. Then, however, Mussolini returned to the fray (meeting of September 21 witnessed by Carradori). But when the Ardennes counteroffensive was launched, he procrastinated in the wake of Hitler, who was more reluctant than ever to consider an anti-Soviet agreement (telephone call of November 22: the "sword that cuts both ways"). With his last-ditch attempt failing due to Patton's unstoppable advance, which began on the morning of January 20, 1945, Mussolini once again approached Churchill's agents the following day, January 21 (second meeting witnessed by Carradori), but returned to Gargnano disappointed by their harshness.

LONATI APPEARS, WITH CAPTAIN "JOHN"

In the fall of 1994, without the slightest press *hype*, the Mursia publishing house printed and sent to bookstores a book entitled *Quel 28 aprile. Mussolini e Claretta: la verità (That April 28. Mussolini and Claretta: the truth).* The author, Bruno Giovanni Lonati, claimed to have killed Benito Mussolini at the request of a British secret service officer named John, who had personally taken care of eliminating Claretta Petacci. A revelation of global significance. A worldwide sensation. But if other, larger publishers had sent the manuscript back to the sender, and if Mursia had finally decided to publish it almost on the sly, it meant that the story, the account, was not very credible.
And indeed it appeared to be so. That is, implausible. It could even have been invented, from the first line to the last. No corroboration, no evidence, no confirmation. A "hoax," in short. That was how it appeared to me six months before the book was published, when I had a copy of the manuscript in my hands. I had just signed, in installments, in *La Notte,* my articles reconstructing the tragedy of Dongo and Mezzegra, in which I put forward, for the first time, the hypothesis of the "English trail" in the killing of Benito Mussolini and Claretta Petacci. An excited phone call from Massimo Donelli, the editor: "You've hit the jackpot! I have a gentleman here in front of me who says that he was the one who killed the Duce on the orders of the British. He left me a copy of the book he has just finished writing and wants you to read it before it comes out in bookstores."
"Who is he? What's his name?"
"Dr. Bruno Lonati, he's a retired Fiat executive." "Lonati... I know who he is. When is his book coming out?" "Well, in the fall, he told me."
"Who told you?"
"Mursia."
I say I'll come by in the evening to pick up the book and then meet with the author face to face. Did you get his phone number? Yes, he's in Brescia. Good.
I read the typescript in one go. First of all, who is this gentleman, this Lonati? He is a name known to the small circle of enthusiasts (the so-called "dongologists") who have always investigated the events in Dongo, not believing, never having believed, that the Italian Communist Party, an offshoot of the Soviet one, could tell the truth about the end of fascism. He had already revealed his role many years earlier to Roberto Gervaso, who was writing his *Claretta,* a biography of the Duce's mistress. Gervaso published his testimony without comment, that is, without taking a position, as any good historian who has been unable to obtain evidence to verify the truth of what he has learned would do.
When he hands me the manuscript at his offices in Via Vitruvio 43, Milan, with the agreement that I will call him to

meet again as soon as I have finished reading it, Bruno Giovanni Lonati is a 73-year-old man, mild-mannered and kind, with a gentlemanly air and a slightly sad look in his eyes. He is from Legnano. He has been a respected business executive throughout his life, as well as the author of technical books on metalworking that have been translated into various languages. From 1936 to 1956, he worked at Franco Tosi. In the meantime, he did his military service (from 1941 to September 8, 1943) and participated in the Resistance as commander of a partisan division formed by the Garibaldi 11 La, 112.a, and 113.a brigades, operating in Milan. He was involved in politics and
activities within the Pei until February 1946. Then he gave up everything and moved to Turin, first as director of a medium-sized company, then to Fiat, where he held management positions, including abroad. After 1980, he directed an important metalworking company in Bari for three years and then became an industrial consultant for various companies. In short, he was what you would call a serious, straightforward person.
Lonati's manuscript is concise and to the point. Almost like a military report. It doesn't take me long to read it. Here is a summary. It is April 27, 1945. It is 4 p.m. Lonati is at the schools on Viale Lombardia in Milan; he and his men are interrogating some arrested fascists when 'Captain John' arrives unexpectedly. Lonati has known him since mid-March.
He knows that he is a captain in the British army working for the secret service, parachuted into the north but immediately crossing into Switzerland, where he has created his own network of collaborators and informants that spreads throughout Lombardy, particularly in the areas of Varese and Como. He had lived with 'John' for several weeks in the same boarding house in Via Vailazze, Milan, where Lonati lived under a false name and organized his partisan activities. In short, they were close friends. 'John' also told him the story of his family: Italian origins, emigration at the beginning of the century, a small tailor's workshop in London, then a men's clothing factory. His brothers were involved in the business, because he had chosen a military career.
"John" gets straight to the point: "Take your weapons and two trusted men and come with me. I have orders to take charge of Mussolini, who has been captured on Lake Como." Lonati has blind faith in "John." He calls "Bruno" and "Gino," who have been part of his division for some time. He describes them as follows: "I was driving around with two of my trusted men. Their nicknames were 'Bruno' and 'Gino.' Bruno was older than
me; he was heavily built and always smiling, with a friendly, cheerful face. He seemed good-natured but, as a former farmer, he was shrewd, practical, and serious. He had been a good fighter and cruelty was not part of his character. "Gino," on the other hand, was in his thirties, more mischievous, slim, with dark skin and curly hair. He also had a brilliant past as a partisan. He was a formidable driver.
Lonati takes a third partisan with him, a very young man known for his courage. His name is "Lino." They arm themselves with a 9mm Beretta, a Sten gun, and hand grenades, and set off in a Fiat 1100 seized from a doctor. They spend the night in a villa in Brunate, above Como. There they meet "Franco," a member of the organization (British Special Forces) who provides the coordinates. The next morning, April 28, the "commando" leaves for Bonzanigo, the De Maria house, where Mussolini and Claretta Petacci were taken during the night by Luigi Canali, "Captain Neri." They arrive after a shootout in Argegno at a roadblock set up by improvised partisans who did not recognize them. 'John' did not mince words and unloaded his machine gun on the unfortunate men. They returned fire. 'Lino' was left on the ground. The car driven by 'Gino', riddled with bullets, continued on.
When they arrived in front of the De Maria house, 'John' and his men disarmed, tied up, and gagged the three partisans placed there by 'Neri' to guard the Duce. Finally, "John" revealed to Lonati and his two companions the purpose of the mission: to seize Mussolini's secret documents before the communists did so on behalf of Stalin, and to kill the Duce and his mistress. But the documents were not there. Mussolini said they had been seized in Dongo. "John" cursed. He would retrieve them later. He, or others from the Special Force.
The fatal, tragic moment arrives at 11 a.m. Lonati shoots Mussolini, 'John' shoots Petacci. 'This
This woman knows everything about Mussolini, she knows the contents of the papers," the Englishman justifies himself, "and besides, if we don't do it, others will." The two bodies are hidden on the ground floor of the De Maria house, where, in the afternoon, "Colonel Valerio" will find them and "shoot them again" in front of the gate of Villa Belmonte. "For history." The end.

All smoke and mirrors?

I read and reread. What can I say? I believe that, among the "dongologi," I am the most inclined to believe this story is plausible. Plausible but unproven. This is the gist of what I say to Lonato when we meet again in Via Vitruvio. Can you give me the first and last names of "Bruno" and "Gino"? No, he doesn't know them either. Can you give me "John's" personal details? He can't, he's bound to confidentiality. Were photos taken of the event? Yes, but they were taken by "John" and he has never seen them. He says that the evidence will be provided the following year, in 1995, on April 28, 50 years after the fateful date, when, as he keeps repeating, "the London archives will be opened." But the archives in London, the Public Record Office, I point out, were opened in 1975. And there was no trace of the matter there.

I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I can't publish anything. We part with a sense of regret but also mutual respect. In the following days, I continue to mull over this story. Out of an old reporter's instinct, I spend a few days checking and verifying. I find that Lonati was indeed a Garibaldi partisan commander. I spend a day in Argegno, first at the municipal registry office and then at the parish priest's office (where I find nothing), then at the cemetery, looking for traces of a possible burial of 'Lino' and other partisans who fell on April 28 (but I find nothing), finally

to talk to the village elders. And here I find the confirmation. Indeed, there was a firefight that morning of April 28 in Argegno between a partisan roadblock and a car (a Fiat 1100? "It could be") with people heading towards Dongo, and there were deaths on the ground. I ascertain that hand grenades were indeed thrown from that car. These were serious people. A full-fledged *commando* action.

I wonder how Lonati knew about it. And I answer myself that - if he had really decided to tell a false but plausible story - after all, as it had been easy for me, it must not have been difficult for him to get news about that armed clash. Similarly, I wonder how he could have invented the secret base in Brunate, above Como, in the villa where the commando unit allegedly spent the night of April 28. It was in a villa in that location, clearly a secret base of the British Special Forces, that 'Captain Neri' was initially supposed to take Mussolini and Petacci. Then problems arose and 'Neri' had fallen back on the De Maria house. So what? Assuming that Lonati had cleverly constructed a colossal lie, even that strange coincidence could have an explanation. Lonati could have learned about the villa in Brunate simply by reading Franco Bandini's book *Vita e morte segreta di Mussolini (The Secret Life and Death of Mussolini),* published in 1978. And adapted his imaginative story to it.

So when Lonati's book came out in the fall, I replied to those who asked me for my opinion *(Avvenire, Il Secolo d'Italia)*: "This story is plausible but unproven." And I added: "It's a shame. Because for years, I had imagined Mussolini's end to be just like that." But here is an excerpt from the interview requested by *Il Secolo d'Italia* and published on September 9, 1994:

Question. Bruno Giovanni Lonati's version sensationally confirms your hypothesis: it was an officer of the British secret service, albeit using local "manpower," who killed Mussolini...

Answer. Lonati's account is plausible, but unfortunately unproven. I have always thought that Special Force could have counted on a vast *network* recruited from among Italian partisans, placed in key positions, to carry out its mission (recovery of documents and physical elimination of the Duce and Mrs. Petacci, the keeper of all his most confidential secrets). I think I have also identified some of these 'basisti' (supporters).

Question. For example?

Answer. For example, 'Captain Neri', aka Luigi Canali, and his lover, the partisan 'Gianna', aka Giuseppina Tuissi, both communists, yet both murdered by the Communist Party a few days after the events in Dongo. Why? Simple. Because, instead of carrying out the orders of the party, and therefore of Moscow, they had carried out those of Special Force. Even today, on Lake Como, there are people who know and are afraid to speak.

Question. You don't mean to say that even today communists have the ability to kill?

Answer. No, but they have the power to ruin, for example, the jobs and careers of the children and grandchildren of the old people who spoke out. I know some of them and I am 'hunting' them down to convince them to give me their valuable testimony. They know a lot, and they all confirm that my 'lead', i.e. the British 'lead', is the right one. Yet it is incredible how much power of dissuasion the communists still have in those parts. When I go to the lake to talk to these people, I feel like I have landed in a southern province rather than in the far north. Woe betide anyone who dares to question that the Duce's "executioners" were the "glorious Garibaldians" with red scarves around their necks.

Unpublished confessions of an executioner

Two years after the publication of Lonati's book, Mario Oriani, editor of *Storia illustrata,* handed me a long typescript that had just arrived: 'This is for you,' he said. It was 24 pages typed and corrected by hand by Lonati. They were a chronicle of his despair, the story of his futile efforts over those two years to find even the slightest proof of the truth of what he had recounted in his book. And the final, bitter admission that he had failed.

I read, reread, think about calling him, having another face-to-face with him, subjecting him to another "third degree." But what for? Everything is already in his memoir-confession. That is, nothing. Nothing that could justify a high-profile news story, a *scoop.* I put it away. In one of the many containers labeled *Mussolini-Petacci.* "It will be useful if one day I write a book about the English trail," I think.

Now the time has come. I pick up those folders titled *A Story Still Unfinished,* which answer practically all the questions that any sensible person would have wanted to ask Mussolini's self-styled executioner: Who were the people with you? Are they alive or dead? Why haven't they confirmed your story? Did you take any photos at the scene? Where are those photos? Did you try knocking on the doors of the British? What did they say? And what about the communists, the party, how did you get away with it? Did they ever try to make you pay?

Rereading those twenty-four pages for the umpteenth time, as I set out to write this chapter, I rediscover that Lonati did what I would have done if, having exaggerated, no one had taken me seriously. I would have desperately sought confirmation. Lonati began to seek this confirmation on the spot, that is, on Lake Como, gaining the same impression that, in years and years of attempts, I and dozens of other historians, journalists, and enthusiasts of the Dongo affair have gained. That is, to use Lonati's words, "the old people who saw it and their children know but do not speak. It seems that they have agreed on a code word, they are evasive, they do not remember, they do not respond. They know how things went, but they remain silent." "Is it possible," Lonati asks, almost irritated, "that the men of Mezzegra did not notice that at 6 p.m., when they loaded the bodies of Mussolini and Petacci onto the truck, they were already stiff? And therefore they could not have been shot less than two hours earlier, as the official version claims?" And he answers: "They did notice, and they told their fellow villager who accompanied me during my research several times." But they told Lonati that they didn't remember.

At a certain point during this unusual historical and personal investigation on the lake, Lonati learns the name of a very elderly lady who, confiding in a friend, had revealed that at 11 a.m. on April 28, 1945, unseen, lurking behind a low wall of her house in Via Nuova, near Zampa, she had witnessed the murder of Mussolini and Petacci at the end of the narrow street leading to the De Maria house. This was exactly the time and place described in Lonati's account. The woman's son had been one of the young men who loaded the bodies onto the truck in the small square in Mezzegra. Lonati listened to the story, told "in a clear and decisive voice" by the old friend of the lady, and recorded it on a cassette in the presence of two of his companions who acted as witnesses. An hour later, unbeknownst to the elderly man, Lonati and
his friends go to the woman's house. They ask her for confirmation. She denies everything. How can we put it? A waste of time. Did that man make it all up? Did the old woman lie?

And the British? Ah, the British! Anyone who knows, even if only by hearsay, the methods and traditions of Her Majesty's secret services cannot escape this dilemma: either Lonati made it all up, and so it doesn't concern them, or he told the truth, but - since no one took him seriously - he can continue to live without risk to his life, given that the world public opinion has been spared the conviction that Claretta Petacci ('now considered the Juliet of the twentieth century', as Lonati says) was murdered by a Brit on behalf of Winston Churchill.

Lonati tried everything with the British. In 1981, when he decided to give Roberto Gervaso, who was writing his *Claretta,* his testimony, he went to London to look for the "John" who in 1945 had ordered him to "keep quiet for at least 35 years, after which I and my two companions, Bruno and Gino, would be free to tell how the events had unfolded," adding that "only after 50 years, by consulting the British archives, would we have access to irrefutable evidence, because everything had been written down, documented, and photographed."

In July 1981, Lonati spoke on the phone with John's brother, Mr. Maccaroni, who ran an important shop in the British capital. He told him that John was currently on duty in Canada. Lonati left him his home and office phone numbers. But let's hear his story: "A few days later, 'John' called me: it was a long phone call. His Italian had deteriorated a little,

but we understood each other well. He told me that he was still working for the services and had even become one of the bosses. He assured me that the documents concerning me were in safe hands and
confirmed that, 50 years after the events, it would be handed over to me by the authorities of his country. I explained to him—reminding him of what he had ordered me to do so long ago in Milan—that, since 35 years had passed, I intended to disclose the news of the event by revealing everything to a reputable Italian historian. He told me that he saw no problem with that and that I could do so. I expressed my desire to see him again in London during the first week of August, telling him where I would be staying: the Royal Lancaster Hotel. A few days later, I left with my wife. He had given me a phone number in Coventry where I could call him. But that number turned out to be non-existent. Days passed, but there was no sign of "John." The following Wednesday morning, August 12, 1981, when we returned to the hotel, we found a message from "John," which I still have: he said he couldn't come to London and that he would be in touch at the end of August in Italy. From that moment on, I had no further news or contact with him. I must point out that, throughout the entire period we stayed in London—and it was difficult not to notice—we were under surveillance.

As a final precaution, before handing over his notes to Roberto Gervaso, Lonati went to see the British Consul General in Milan, Mr. Thompson, on February 2, 1982, and submitted the text to him. "The consul," says Lonati, "authorized me to pass on the notes I had written to Gervaso for publication in his book, and together we wrote a draft letter that, 50 years after the events, the British authorities would give me." The text of this draft—also included in the book *Dalle carte segrete del Duce* (From the *Secret Papers of the Duce)* by historian Peter Tompkins (Tropea, Milan, 2001)—is as follows: "After difficult and thorough research, we can now give you a positive response to your requests submitted some time ago to our embassy in Rome and our consulate in Milan.

. It has been confirmed that in the last days of April 1945, one of our special services officers working for the British 8th Army command in Italy participated in an Italian partisan commando operation that resulted in the deaths of Mussolini and Mrs. Petacci. We also confirm that the Italian partisans were led by Commander "Giacomo" (Bruno Giovanni Lonati). We believe that the content of this letter corroborates what you have communicated to our officials in Italy in recent years and that it is to your satisfaction. With kind regards.

The "50 years since the events" finally came to an end in April 1995, when *Quel 28 aprile* (awaited by historians, not without a certain skepticism, since 1982) had been in bookstores for several months. All was quiet. No reaction, no denial from the British authorities. On June 6, 1995, Lonati wrote to the British ambassador in Italy asking for the documentation produced at the time after the execution of Mussolini and Petacci. A dead letter. No reply. This story does not concern them.

What remains? Ah, yes: 'Bruno', 'Gino' and the other former partisans of Viale Lombardia. "At least give me the first and last names of 'Bruno' and 'Gino,'" I asked Lonati that day, in the office of the editor-in-chief of *La Notte, "*SO I can begin to believe you." He replied that he didn't know them either. At that point, Massimo Donelli and I looked each other in the eyes and spread our arms.

He really didn't know them. And in the memoir he delivered two years later to *Storia illustrata*, he explains it this way: "In the summer of 1995, since the British had not provided me with the requested documentation, I set out to find 'Bruno' and 'Gino'. I returned to Milan, to Viale Lombardia, where my command had been based, and specifically to the club that now bears the name of Angelo Fiocchi (Arcinova An-
gelo Fiocchi), who was shot by the fascists. I spoke with Dante Cavallari, founder of the club, and with Giordano Fiocchi, Angelo's younger brother. I thus obtained the personal details of 'Bruno': he was the son of the doorman of a building in Viale Lombardia, and in 1947, since he could not find work in Italy, he emigrated to Brazil. I must say right away that I am not certain that I have identified the real "Bruno," only strong suspicions. From subsequent research, I ascertained that he had returned to Italy from São Paulo in 1959, to Cremona. I went to that municipality and ascertained that, since September 2, 1969, he had taken up residence in Liguria with his wife, in an apartment they owned. It was here that I found him. Having obtained his telephone number from Telecom and made an appointment, I met him one Sunday morning in late May at his home. He was over 80 years old. I remembered him as being more corpulent. Before I even asked him if he recognized me, explaining the reason for my visit, he launched into a series of statements that seemed highly implausible and made me suspicious. He had been in command of Viale Lombardia, yes, but his nom de guerre, he said, was not "Bruno" but "Luigi," and moreover, he had never had the opportunity to

take up arms (but in the following days, when I returned to the club on Viale Lombardia, they told me that "Bruno" had never had a nom de guerre: Bruno was simply his real name. And there were no other partisans with that name. There was only him). He didn't even ask me what I wanted from him. The whole time, his only concern was to repeat that he had been a partisan, yes, but only in name.

When Lonati, once again empty-handed, returned to the club on Viale Lombardia, they put him in touch with Mario Mazzali, a former partisan whose nom de guerre was "Peppone." "He confirmed that Bruno had never had a nom de guerre and told me that he had fled Italy after the Liberation, explaining his reasons with very clear and suggestive gestures." In short,

. It has been confirmed that in the last days of April 1945, one of our special services officers working for the British 8th Army command in Italy took part in an Italian partisan commando operation that resulted in the deaths of Mussolini and Mrs. Petacci. It is also confirmed that the Italian partisans were led by Commander "Giacomo" (Bruno Giovanni Lonati). We believe that the content of this letter confirms what you have communicated to our officials in Italy in recent years, and that it is to your satisfaction. With cordial regards."

The "50 years since the events" finally came to an end in April 1995, when *Quel 28 aprile* (awaited by historians, not without a certain skepticism, since 1982) had been in bookstores for several months. Everything was quiet. No reaction, no denial from the British authorities. On June 6, 1995, Lonati wrote to the British ambassador in Italy asking for the documentation produced at the time after the execution of Mussolini and Petacci. The letter went unanswered. No response. This story does not concern them.

What remains? Ah, yes: 'Bruno', 'Gino' and the other former partisans of Viale Lombardia. 'At least give me the first and last names of "Bruno" and "Gino,"' I asked Lonati that day, in the office of the editor-in-chief of *La Notte,* 'and I'll start to believe you. He replied that he didn't know them either. At that point, Massimo Donelli and I looked each other in the eyes and spread our arms.

He really didn't know them. And in the memoir he delivered two years later to *Storia illustrata*, he explains it this way: "In the summer of 1995, since the British had not given me the requested documentation, I set out to find 'Bruno' and 'Gino'. I returned to Milan, to Viale Lombardia, where my headquarters had been located, and specifically to the club that now bears the name of Angelo Fiocchi (Arcinova An-

gelo Fiocchi), who was shot by the fascists. I spoke with Dante Cavallari, founder of the club, and with Giordano Fiocchi, Angelo's younger brother. I thus obtained the personal details of 'Bruno': he was the son of the doorman of a building in Viale Lombardia, and in 1947, since he could not find work in Italy, he emigrated to Brazil. I must say right away that I am not certain that I have identified the real "Bruno," only strong suspicions. From subsequent research, I ascertained that he had returned to Italy from São Paulo in 1959, to Cremona. I went to that municipality and ascertained that, since September 2, 1969, he had taken up residence in Liguria with his wife, in an apartment they owned. It was here that I found him. Having obtained his telephone number from Telecom and made an appointment, I met him one Sunday morning in late May at his home. He was over 80 years old. I remembered him as being more corpulent. Before I even asked him if he recognized me, explaining the reason for my visit, he launched into a series of statements that seemed highly implausible and made me suspicious. He had been in command of Viale Lombardia, yes, but his nom de guerre, he said, was not "Bruno" but "Luigi," and moreover, he had never had the opportunity to take up arms (but in the following days, when I returned to the club on Viale Lombardia, they told me that "Bruno" had never had a nom de guerre: Bruno was simply his real name. And there were no other partisans with that name. There was only him). He didn't even ask me what I wanted from him. The whole time, his only concern was to repeat that he had been a partisan, yes, but only in name.

When Lonati, empty-handed once again, returned to the club on Viale Lombardia, they put him in touch with Mario Mazzali, a former partisan whose nom de guerre was "Peppone." "He confirmed that Bruno had never had a nom de guerre and told me that he had fled Italy after the Liberation, explaining his reasons with very clear and suggestive gestures." In short,

, he made it clear that if he stayed in Milan, he would risk his life. Lonati then asked "Peppone" for news of "Gino." "'I'll think about it,' he replied, gave me a name, and told me to come back in a few weeks. I returned, but 'Peppone' was nowhere to be found: another person who was distancing himself. Later, Fiocchi was nowhere to be found either. It's strange that a person over eighty years old is constantly engaged in important meetings."

After many years, Lonati reestablished his relationship with Giovanni Pesce, the leader of the "gappisti" in Milan, a gold medalist of the Resistance, elderly but—as Lonati describes him—"lucid, sprightly, full of life, and not at all presumptuous." The old animosity is water under the bridge. Lonati speaks of him with admiration and sympathy and says he is "convinced that no one knows better than he how the operations of April 28, 1945, unfolded." This is because Pesce "went to Dongo after 'Valerio' and Lampredi had already left Milan, but for a mission with other objectives, about which he never wanted to tell me anything." Pesce found the bodies of those shot in Dongo, including Mussolini and Petacci. "The most credible versions of Mussolini's death that have emerged in recent years, as well as the first, that of Walter Audisio, written under political pressure, make him laugh, and I've seen him smirk." But "he will keep quiet as long as he lives." Why? "It's the same old story: he has no reason to speak out, he lives a quiet middle-class life, and he is happy with all the historical versions that do not mention his name and keep him away from Giulino di Mezzegra, where he was also present that day."
Poor Bruno Giovanni Lonati. No one believed him in 1982, when his account was published in Gervaso's book; no one believed him in 1994, when his book *Quel 28 aprile (That April 28)* came out*;* no one believes him when, at the end of his memoir in *Storia illustrata,* he writes bitterly
: 'For over thirty-five years, I kept everything inside, cutting off all contact with the men who had been close to me immediately after the event. Then, faithful to my promise, I told the truth. At the same time, I had assurances from the British that, at the end of fifty years, I would receive the documentation, that is, the evidence. At the end of fifty years, the bitter surprise. Since what I had been promised did not happen, I tried to reconnect with the past: a belated and very difficult, practically impossible task. I definitely should have acted sooner, much sooner. They have all become stone statues. Everyone says I look younger than my age. That may be so. But now I am making up for lost time: I feel that my life is getting shorter. Mistakes and misplaced trust come at a price. At the end of my book, I wrote: "Of course, I wouldn't do it again." Now I add: "Of course, it was better to keep it all inside."

"The Alpine soldier," or the man of mystery

Never lose hope. Although Bruno Giovanni Lonati was apparently unable (or unable) to provide a single piece of evidence to prove the veracity of his story, in reality, even beyond his intentions, a figure appears in his memories that he cannot have invented, because, as we shall see in the next chapter, this figure appears in a completely different situation, one that is entirely unknown to him: "the Alpine soldier."
Who is the Alpine soldier? He is a British secret service agent who enters the scene during the deadly mission in Bonzanigo. Lonati is informed of his existence and his role during the night stop in the villa between Como and Brunate. Here, the local British agent, "Franco," explains how they can reach the house where Mussolini and Petacci are being held:

"Don't worry: I have already arranged for someone to be on the road you will take to give you directions to the house: after Tremezzo, on the right, you will find a man wearing an Alpine hat. Stop and he will show you the place and the road, or give you new information. The password is: 'Let's go on a nice trip,' and the answer is: 'I know a nice place.'"
"Just outside Tremezzo," says Lonati, "we saw our man. From now on, I will refer to him as 'the Alpine soldier' because he was wearing boots, knickerbockers, a green velvet jacket, an Alpine hat without a feather, and he had a pipe in his mouth. He was holding a stick in his hand, he was short and had a lively, intelligent face with dimples. We stopped and exchanged passwords." Lonati points out that the Alpine soldier and "John" greeted each other with a nod, a sign that they knew each other. He recalls that the Alpine soldier apologized for not being able to accompany them, "but I have to stay here to cover your retreat." Finally, he specified the route they should follow with these words: "Go ahead, after Azzano there is a sign on the left side of the lake indicating Mezzegra. Continue on that road until you reach Bonzanigo, and then I think you'll have to walk. The house where 'he' is should be at the end, but I don't know which one it is. If you see people, it's better not to ask. Keep your eyes open and look for the partisans. He should be there."
The Alpine soldier reappeared once the mission was complete. He proved himself to be alert, ready, and invaluable. "In Tremezzo, at the agreed-upon spot, the Alpine soldier was waiting. As soon as he saw us from a distance, he turned onto a steep side road. The car could barely pass, the road was very bumpy. At walking pace, it took about ten minutes

to reach a farmhouse after many bends. Without saying a word, the Alpine soldier opened an empty barn and motioned for us to drive in."
Here, the Alpine soldier is informed of the outcome of the mission by 'John', who tells him: 'We didn't find the papers we were looking for: we need to find out where they are'. The Alpine soldier nods, then tells the group to stay there ('there's food') while he goes to get them a car to replace the battered one they arrived in. "The Alpine soldier took his bicycle and left. [... Shortly after 4 p.m., we heard the sound of a car. We jumped to our feet with our weapons in hand and took up position. It was the Alpine soldier who, having left his bicycle, was returning with another car, identical to ours but black in color. I turned to "John": "Don't tell me this car is here by chance too." "No, of course not: he knows what he's doing." The Alpine soldier entered the house and gave us the latest news [...] "John" asked him again for the documents. "Nothing," replied the Alpine soldier, "the 52nd Brigade that captured them will have them. There are some smart people there, but there are also some I don't like." "Well then," said John, "make one last effort and give me some news. We're going back to Milan, and you know where to find me." "Yes, sir, a-rocks!" The Alpine soldier saluted us militarily, and we got into the car he had arrived in.
The Alpine soldier disappeared. Nothing will ever be known about him: not his name, address, age, or fate. But he did not disappear forever.

Litmus test: an Alpine soldier in the death of 'Gianna'

There is an Alpine soldier in the story of the death of Giuseppina Tuissi, the partisan "Gianna," the lover of "Captain Neri"; and he appears in the guise of an agent of the British secret service.
Lonati knows nothing about this story, and he certainly cannot be aware of the role played in it by 'the Alpine soldier', because that role will only come to light after

the publication of his *Quel 28 aprile... (That 28th of April...),* when the author of this book, together with his colleague and friend Alessandro Zanella, interviewed F. D., the witness to the end of "Gianna," and published the story in the Milanese weekly magazine *Noi.* It is a story worth reading from beginning to end, not least because the Alpine soldier who appears as a supporting character lends considerable credence to Lonati's revelations.
First, however, it should be noted that F. D. is the initials used to conceal the identity of a man who, until he confided in Garibaldi and Zanella, confident that he could count on their discretion, had never told anyone, out of fear, about the murder he had witnessed firsthand. Physical fear. Fear - to use his words - "of meeting the same fate as all the people who were killed because they wanted to talk." But here, in his dramatic reconstruction, is how he entered the life of "Gianna," the companion of 'Captain Neri', who was always followed, like a shadow, until the day of her death on Saturday, June 23, 1945, by a mysterious English woman, 'a woman in her mid-thirties' who had free access to the partisan command and who disappeared immediately after the girl's murder.

F. D.: "That's how they killed 'Gianna'"

"In April 1945, I was 17 years old and working as a mechanic in a workshop in Como that had been requisitioned by the authorities. I knew my way around cars. Although I didn't have a driver's license yet, I could drive any type of vehicle with skill. After the events in Dongo and the capture of Mussolini's column, there was a transfer of power in Como: from the fascists to the CLN partisans. We mechanics obviously went over to serve the new masters. I was put in charge of driving one of the cars

available to the partisans. The car was part of the Mussolini column's fleet, which, after its capture on April 27, had been piled up in the gardens of Villa Pas- salacqua in Moltrasio. There were more than 50 cars, with license plates from all over Italy (I remember Ge, Bo, Pv, Mi, etc.), a Fiat 626 truck belonging to the GNR (National Republican Guard) and some German motorcycles. I managed to start a metallic Aprilia with a Ge license plate, which the partisans on guard had given me permission to keep and with which they often asked me to take them somewhere.
I minded my own business and kept as quiet as possible. During those weeks, there was a lot of activity at Villa Passalacqua because the building had been the headquarters of the Bank of Italy during the Republic, and there was a

great deal of coming and going of officials, military personnel, and trucks transporting valuables, which I cannot say where they ended up.
One day, which I don't remember exactly, but which I can place around May 10, a green Fiat 1100 arrived at Villa Passalacqua with a very important partisan commander on board, Pietro Vergani "Fabio," head of all the Garibaldini in Lombardy. With him were a man dressed as an Alpine soldier and armed with a musket, two women, and two children. Of the two women, I was immediately struck by the appearance of the younger one: she looked as if she were suffering, with an intense gaze, black hair, and fiery eyes, constantly looking around as if to understand whether she could trust or whether she should be on her guard. She was "Gianna," or so she said her name was, and that's what she wanted me to call her. The other woman, whose name I remember as Coven, or something similar, was English, around 35 years old, dressed in black, a long skirt and a dark T-shirt, with a backpack on her shoulders. She treated 'Gianna' with a familiarity that immediately struck me as affected. There was something insincere, false about her that struck me. Instinctively, as can happen to a 17-year-old boy, I immediately sympathized with "Gianna," while
I felt a certain dislike for the English woman, which I kept to myself. She lived inside Villa Passalacqua, although I had never seen her before, but the villa was huge and had numerous entrances.
The two children then got out of the car, emaciated, frightened, pale, and almost unable to speak. "Gianna" explained to me that they were the children of Marcello Petacci, Claretta's brother, one of those shot in Dongo, while "Fabio" ordered me to find them somewhere to stay in Como. I immediately thought of taking them to the Ursulines, where I had a relative. So I did, but the nuns did not want to keep them and sent me to the orphanage in Via Ozanam, where I left the poor children, who were increasingly frightened. After delivering the children, together with "Gianna," the Alpine soldier, and the Englishwoman, we went to the PEI federation in Como (Palazzo Terragni), where "Gianna" hoped to get news about the fate of her man, Luigi Canali, "Captain Neri," who had mysteriously disappeared since May 8. Coven entered the federation offices with her. Gianna came out crying, devastated. They had given her no satisfaction. It was then that she asked me to take her to Milan. I put her and the other two on the Aprilia I had been given and set off.
During the trip, listening to Gianna's conversations (because she did most of the talking, the Alpine soldier just nodded, and the English woman said a few words in her broken Italian), I got a clear idea of the girl and the problem that was troubling her. She wanted to know the truth about Neri's mysterious disappearance. 'I have a right to know,' she said to her two companions, 'and you must help me.' Every now and then she would burst into tears, and her desperate sobs tugged at my heartstrings. We looked at each other in the rearview mirror, and she noticed how moved I was.
"In Milan, I stopped in front of Palazzo Cusani, where the Garibaldi Brigades headquarters were located. I stayed in the car
with the Alpine soldier. Gianna and Coven went inside. After a while, some partisans came to pick up the Alpine soldier. After about two hours, I was taken away, rather abruptly, by two partisans and brought inside, where a commander, whom I later recognized from photos published in the newspapers as Walter Audisio, "Colonel Valerio," subjected me to a harsh interrogation. He wanted to know if I knew "Gianna," why I had brought her there, and what I knew. "Nothing," I replied, "I just carried out an order from 'Fabio.'" He didn't want to believe me. And in fact, it wasn't "Fabio" who ordered me to go to Milan. It took a while to convince him. Then he let me go. I waited for another four hours. When "Gianna" returned with the Alpine soldier and Coven, she was distraught, severely shaken. She looked pitiful. She looked as if she might faint at any moment. The Englishwoman was supporting her as one supports a sleepwalker or a dazed person, but it was obvious that she felt no real compassion for the poor girl. And the Alpine soldier was also increasingly impassive. Those two had used her, just as they had surely used her man in his time, and now they were abandoning her to her fate.
During the return journey, 'Gianna' recovered from her stupor when, now on the highway, the car stopped because it had run out of fuel. After a long wait, we saw a convoy of British soldiers approaching behind us. Coven decisively stopped the lead *jeep*, showed an ID card to the officer in charge of the convoy, and immediately some soldiers were ordered to fill our tank and leave us a spare canister. We were near the exit for Lomazzo, where some of Gianna's relatives lived. She asked me to take her to them and showed me the way. We all felt the need to stop and refresh ourselves after the stress we had endured in Milan. They prepared a frugal dinner for us. We all ate in silence. 'Gianna'

could not
talk about 'Neri' and cry. During dinner, the girl spoke to me. She affectionately called me 'Balilla'. I was a young boy and she trusted me. She showed me the handbag where she kept a small pistol with a silver handle. "This," she said, "belonged to Claretta Petacci. Look, her initials are engraved on it. I'll give it to you," she promised, "because I hate guns, I can't stand the sight of them anymore. But you have to help me find Neri."
When we returned to Villa Passalacqua, it was already late at night. The English woman invited "Gianna" to sleep at her place, in the apartment she had at her disposal in the villa. The Alpine soldier and I slept in the car.
In the days that followed, I continued my work at Villa Passalacqua, often interrupted by new car trips at the request of "Gianna," who continued her futile searches. I wasn't always with "Gianna." Sometimes she went out with the English woman. Then, for a long time, I didn't see her anymore. She had been arrested in Milan, as a result of her insistence, on Vergani's orders, and locked up in a section of the party. She was then released with strict orders not to show up in Como again. But the girl did not obey.

"She came back to look for me. She was as pale as a corpse. She revealed to me that she had finally learned the truth. 'Balilla,' she said, placing a hand on my shoulder, 'now I know. They killed him! And they want to kill me too!' I wanted to comfort her, hug her, encourage her, tell her not to be discouraged, but I was just a 17-year-old boy, frightened, unarmed, with no chance of doing anything concrete for her.
I am sure that was also her last day alive. In fact, that same evening, what I can now safely call the "firing squad" arrived at Villa Passalacqua: the killers to whom Coven and the Alpine soldier, i.e., the British secret service, had handed over their designated victim. And
were the two M. brothers (with a motorcycle on which the partisan G. also traveled) and the partisan P., a small squad specialized in the elimination of fascist prisoners, who were picked up almost every evening at the schools in Moltrasio and taken to the Lido, where they were killed and their bodies thrown into the lake. They led them away on foot, telling them that they were being transferred to the concentration camp in Via XX Settembre.
"Gianna" knew them all very well and clearly had no reason to fear them, as they were friendly towards her. They seemed to have come to cheer her up. After chatting with her for a while in a friendly tone, the three on the motorcycle said goodbye and left, apparently going about their business. We remained: the partisan P., "Gianna," Coven, and me. After a while, the partisan P. suggested that we all go to Cernobbio for ice cream.
Coven made up some excuse and declined the invitation. Gianna and partisan P. got into my car. We set off for Cernobbio. It was the middle of the night, pitch black. At the bottom of the Pizzo di Cernobbio descent, we saw the three on the motorcycle stopped. I pulled up alongside them. The two brothers were pretending to repair a breakdown. The partisan G. crossed the road and said, "The motorcycle has broken down." The partisan P. invited her to get in with us. But she said, "No, I'd rather walk." Then, turning to "Gianna," she said, "Come on, Gianna, come with me, let's walk." "Gianna" got out of the car. As soon as she got out, P. turned to me and said, "Let's go, just the two of us." He made me stop the car in front of the bar, located in the building opposite the current Regina Olga hotel. The partisan P. ordered beer for himself and ice cream for me.
No more than fifteen minutes passed. Then we heard the roar of a motorcycle. The two brothers and the partisan G. got off. "Gianna" was gone. The partisan G. sat down at the table and said nervously, "She noticed. We had to hide
her on the road and then throw her into the lake. So she went to keep her man company." I felt myself freeze: suddenly I understood. I began to tremble like a leaf. The partisan P. looked at me for a moment, then said, "You go. You're done here."
I sneaked out, overcome with terror. Those murderers had killed her! I would never be able to comfort her again, she would never be able to give me the gun with the silver handle. I felt all the guilt, the curse, the condemnation of being just a powerless kid. Driving back to Villa Passalacqua, I noticed with horror a patch of blood on the asphalt, not far from the low wall. And I began to fear for my life. I was sure they would have second thoughts and try to kill me too. I was on my guard. I asked for news of Coven and the Alpine soldier. They had suddenly disappeared and no one knew anything. On the other hand, a few days later, there was a lot of excitement in Moltrasio because British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had arrived and taken up residence at Villa Le Rose, now Villa Versace, right at the beginning of Via Madonnina, where the road leading up to Villa Passalacqua begins. At the time, I was too young to understand certain connections and make complete arguments, but today I can easily explain Churchill's presence just

a stone's throw from the villa, which was clearly one of the headquarters of British espionage and where, in all likelihood, the Duce's most sensitive documents had been collected.
After a few days, still fearing for my life, I asked the partisan commander I reported to, Amos Santi, if I could return home for family reasons. A few days later, I disappeared without a trace. I left the lake and went to Trento, where I had a friend. There I found work. Meanwhile, the years passed. But inside me, the memory of 'Gianna' and her tragedy remained alive and indelible.
When, in 1957, the Padua trial began for the theft of the Dongo gold and the murders that followed, including that of 'Gianna', I was the only one who knew how things had really gone, at least in the case of 'Gianna's' murder, but I was too afraid to come forward. And so I kept the secret to myself in all the years that followed. Now I am old and I have decided to tell what I know, also in the hope that other people who saw and knew will come forward. No one can be afraid for their physical safety anymore, even if some of the murderers are still alive and, in any case, enjoy a vast array of mafia-style friendships and cover-ups in former communist and communist political circles. This still prevents me from revealing my identity today. But perhaps the time has finally come to remove the sinister shadow that has hung over Como for fifty years, known as 'the curse of the lake'. Too many dead bodies lie at the bottom of these dark waters, still waiting, if not for justice, then at least for the truth.

Here end the confessions of E. D., which bring back memories of gruesome crimes. We will return to this, to see how not only the waters of the lake are murky, but also the reflections of historical truth. But in the meantime, it is essential to remember one point. One thing is certain: F. D. had never heard of Lonati. And Lonati, in turn, could never have imagined the existence of a witness, completely unexpected by him, who could confirm that an Italian agent of the British secret service, unmistakably dressed as an Alpine soldier, was operating on Lake Como.

CLARETTA'S (SECRET) DIARIES

In Montanelli's "Room"

In August 1999, in Indro Montanelli's popular *Stanza*, in *the Corriere della Sera,* a discussion developed on the subject of Garetta Petacci's diaries, swallowed up in state secrets and brought back into the spotlight following a controversy that had begun years earlier and involved, on the one hand, the author of this book together with his friend and fellow historical researcher Alessandro Zanella, and on the other, various ministerial offices. To *Corriere* reader Francesco Satta, who asked why former Interior Minister Giorgio Napolitano had prevented Luciano Garibaldi and Alessandro Zanella from viewing the diaries of the Duce's mistress, Montanelli replied that he "greatly doubted the existence of a Petacci diary" and added: "I believe, however, that I can rule out that the author was capable of rising above gossip. Therefore, I don't even see why Napolitano should have prevented historians from viewing it."
Giorgio Napolitano replied to Montanelli's response, meticulously reconstructing the various requests submitted by Luciano Garibaldi and Alessandro Zanella and explaining why his undersecretary Abate, in response to the two scholars' request, had ruled out any possibility of viewing Petacci's papers. In his reply, Montanelli agreed with Napolitano.
The author of this book, who had remained on the sidelines until then, felt he had to intervene at this point and sent Montanelli the following letter, which was published in its entirety:

"Dear Montanelli, I refer to the letter from reader Francesco Satta *(Stanza*, August 21) and the intervention of the Hon. Giorgio Napolitano *(Stanza*, August 23) regarding the diaries of Claretta Petacci. What Mr. Napolitano reports, in his capacity as former Minister of the Interior, is unexceptionable. In fact, since 1995 (the date of expiry of the 50-year 'secrecy' period for documents containing state secrets), together with my colleague Alessandro Zanella, author of the book *L'ora di Dongo,* I have been seeking confirmation. Specifically, as stated in the request to the Ministry of the Interior, the most recent one, "confirmation in Clara Petacci's diaries of information already in our possession regarding relations between Benito Mussolini and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill during the last four months of the Italian Social Republic." I quote again from our request: "Therefore, what the writers are asking for is a consultation limited to the particular case referred to in the previous paragraph, which has nothing to do with the provisions of the second paragraph of the aforementioned Presidential Decree 1409/63 ('secrecy' for 70 years of documents concerning purely private situations of individuals), but which cannot be further prevented from being accessed by historical researchers, as the 50 years required by law for confidential state documents have expired. In conclusion, the writers request partial consultation, supervised by the archival authorities, in the absence of which it must be inferred that representatives of the State are placing unjustified obstacles in the way of the work of free historical researchers'. To this request, Undersecretary Abate, in the name and on behalf of Minister Napolitano (textually: 'for the minister'), replied with a flat refusal. And do you know why, dear Montanelli? Because – and I quote from the response – 'during the necessary preliminary investigation, no information relevant to the scholars' field of research was found'. But yes, dear Montanelli. You must be right, as you are our teacher: as you wrote, poor Claretta could only write gossip in her diaries'.
Three statements by De Felice

In his commentary on the letter, Montanelli definitively closed the dispute with these words: "I do not intend to turn this page into an arena of disputes over the historical value of Claretta's diaries, which, as far as I know, did not even pique the interest of a document collector such as De Felice."
This was true. De Felice probably did not have time to be tempted, having left this earthly scene prematurely, much to everyone's regret. But before that, he had had time to declare himself convinced of the "English trail" in the deaths of Mussolini and Claretta. He did so on three occasions: in a book-length interview written by Pasquale Chessa (*Rosso e Nero,* Milan 1995) and in two interviews given to *L'Espresso* on September 11 and to *Corriere della Sera* on November 19 of that year. In the interview with *L'Espresso*, the following statement could be read: "The British were determined not to let Mussolini arrive alive at the trial, because what he might have said would have created enormous

problems." Not only what he might have said, but also what Claretta Petacci might have sworn to, with absolute and precise temporal and written references (namely the pages of her diaries). That is why Claretta disappeared. That is why his diaries disappeared. De Felice was even more explicit in his interview with *Corriere:* "The documentation in my possession all leads to one conclusion: Benito Mussolini was killed by a group of Milanese partisans at the urging of the British secret services. There was an interest in ensuring that the leader of fascism never made it to trial. The British suggested: 'Get rid of him', while the terms of the armistice stipulated his surrender. It was much better for the British if Mussolini were dead. At stake was the national interest linked to the explosive compromises contained in the correspondence that the British Prime Minister had exchanged with Mussolini before and during the war."

As for the always intelligent and profound reflections contained in his last book-interview, De Felice put forward one that the author of this book found contradictory to the rest of his historical reconstruction: that the Duce's death was not "the most important thing in his life." Yet the very fact that the entire Italian press had given space (among the unconventional and courageous theses put forward in *Rosso e Nero)* almost exclusively to the short chapter on Mussolini's death proved the opposite. It proved, that is, that the truth about Benito Mussolini's death was, is, and will remain one of the crucial issues in the history of our country.

On a purely scientific research level, it cannot be ignored that the killing of Mussolini by the partisans, essentially on the decision of the communists, is one thing, while his killing by the British, or in any case - as De Felice himself hypothesized - by Italian partisans at the instigation of one or more British agents, is another.

We were, and are, clearly faced with a knot in contemporary history that must be untangled if we do not want mythology and legend (the 'vulgate', as De Felice rightly called it) to definitively take precedence over historical truth, adding further negative connotations to the character and morality of Italians, as if those that have always haunted us were not enough.

If Mussolini had acted with patriotism and foresight in creating the Italian Social Republic (in order to prevent, in De Felice's words, Hitler from 'turning Italy into a new Poland'), it follows that the same prudence and foresight must have characterized his attitude towards the powers that, since 1943, appeared to be the victors of the immense world conflict. Faced with a Roosevelt who detested him and a Stalin who hated him, he had only one person left to whom he could entrust his hopes for the least bloody end possible for fascism: Winston Churchill, his former admirer.

bloodless possible for fascism: Winston Churchill, his longtime admirer.

So far, we are on the level of logical deductions, which also belong to scientific methodology. But there are specific facts to support this thesis.

The correspondence with Churchill is certainly not a fantasy. In the next chapter, we will read the dramatic messages that Carlo Alberto Biggini, the Duce's minister before and during Salò, adventurously sent to the family from his hiding place in the Basilica del Santo in Padua during the summer of 1945. He anxiously asked for news of the photographic copies of the Mussolini-Churchill correspondence, entrusted to him by the Duce shortly before the end so that he, Biggini, who was Mussolini's 'minister of the heart' and who would certainly be saved (because Corrado Bonfantini, Carlo Silvestri and all the anti-fascist university professors, starting with Meneghetti, who owed him their lives, as he had rescued them from the clutches of the Germans), would make them public—in the worst-case scenario, which is what happened in Dongo—as he had done in the past with the secret correspondence of the Conciliation, documents that had also been given to him by the Duce. And we will read about the mysterious and highly suspicious circumstances of his premature death.

Today, when many are 'discovering' alleged 'truths' about the correspondence, often (poorly) copying the work of journalists and historical researchers such as Arrigo Petacco, Franco Bandini, Silvio Bertoldi, Gaspare Di Sclafani, Alessandro Zanella, Fabio Andriola, and others, we need a surge of pride from 'official' Italy: the Italy whose institutional task is to safeguard the archives, documents, and sources of our history. But this 'official' Italy remains silent. For example, almost sixty years after the events, we still do not know how many Italian citizens were murdered by the communists after April 25, 1945.

As for the always intelligent and profound reflections contained in his latest book-interview, De Felice put forward one that the author of this book found contradictory to the rest of his historical reconstruction: that the death of the Duce was not "the most important thing in his life." Yet the very fact that the entire Italian press had given space (among the unconventional and courageous theses put forward in *Rosso e Nero)* almost exclusively to the short

chapter on Mussolini's death proved the opposite. It proved, that is, that the truth about Benito Mussolini's death was, is, and will remain one of the crucial issues in the history of our country.
From a purely scientific point of view, it cannot be ignored that Mussolini's killing by the partisans, essentially on the decision of the communists, is one thing, and his killing by the British, or in any case - as De Felice himself hypothesized - by Italian partisans at the instigation of one or more British agents, is another.
We were, and are, clearly faced with a knot in contemporary history that must be untangled if we do not want mythology and legend (the 'vulgate', as De Felice rightly called it) to definitively take precedence over historical truth, adding further negative connotations to the character and morality of Italians, as if those that have always haunted us were not enough.
If Mussolini had acted with patriotism and foresight in creating the Italian Social Republic (in order to prevent, in De Felice's words, Hitler from "turning Italy into a new Poland"), it follows that his attitude towards the powers that, since 1943, appeared to be the victors of the immense world conflict must have been characterized by equal prudence and foresight. Faced with a Roosevelt who detested him and a Stalin who hated him, he had only one figure left to whom he could entrust his hopes for the least bloody end possible for fascism: Winston Churchill, his former admirer.
bloodless possible for fascism: Winston Churchill, his long-time admirer.
So far, we are on the level of logical deductions, which also belong to scientific methodology. But there are specific facts to support this thesis.
The correspondence with Churchill is certainly not a fantasy. In the next chapter, we will read the dramatic messages that Carlo Alberto Biggini, the Duce's minister before and during Salò, adventurously sent to the family from his hiding place in the Basilica del Santo in Padua during the summer of 1945. He anxiously asked for news of the photographic copies of the Mussolini-Churchill correspondence, entrusted to him by the Duce shortly before the end so that he, Biggini, who was Mussolini's 'minister of the heart' and who would certainly be saved (because Corrado Bonfantini, Carlo Silvestri and all the anti-fascist university professors, starting with Meneghetti, who owed him their lives, having been rescued by him from the clutches of the Germans), would make them public - in the worst-case scenario, which is what happened in Dongo - as he had done in his time with the secret correspondence of the Conciliation, documents that had also been given to him by the Duce. And we will read about the mysterious and highly suspicious circumstances surrounding his premature death.
Today, when many are 'discovering' alleged 'truths' about the correspondence, often (poorly) copying the work of journalists and historical researchers such as Arrigo Petacco, Franco Bandini, Silvio Bertoldi, Gaspare Di Sclafani, Alessandro Zanella, Fabio Andriola, and others, we need a surge of pride from 'official' Italy: the Italy whose institutional task is to safeguard the archives, documents, and sources of our history. But this 'official' Italy remains silent. For example, almost sixty years after the events, we still do not know how many Italian citizens were murdered by the communists after April 25, 1945,
while we continue to read detailed accounts of *the* Argentine *desaparecidos* in daily and weekly newspapers. Is it possible that the state remains silent even on the number of members of the armed forces of the Italian Social Republic who were killed after the cessation of hostilities, i.e., while they were prisoners of war and, as such, should have been protected by *the Geneva Convention,* expressly referred to in the act of surrender signed on April 29, 1945, at the Royal Palace of Caserta by the German plenipotentiaries, also in the name and on behalf of the commander of the fascist forces, Marshal Oraziani? How much longer will we have to be satisfied with 'estimates', the horrendous 'estimates of death'? Are we afraid to let Italians know, especially the younger generations, who cannot even imagine such horror, how gratuitous the saying 'Italians are good people' is? Who is keeping the archives closed?
The same applies to Claretta's letters and diaries. Why are they not being returned to her grandson Ferdinando, who is their rightful heir? Is there perhaps a fear of revealing the true role played by this woman not only in Mussolini's life, but also in the history of Italy? And, perhaps, of revealing that it was a positive role? Petacci's papers are there waiting. Italian history demands them. They must be made public without anyone speculating on them in any economic or ideological way.

The word of a general

In 1983, the author of this book conducted a lengthy interview with General Karl Wolff, former head of the SS in Italy

during the Italian Social Republic, and learned from him, among many other things, that the Germans read all the correspondence and intercepted all the telephone calls between Villa Feltrinelli (where Mussolini lived) and Villa Mirabella (where Claretta lived).

Claretta lived). And that the subject of these exchanges of letters and phone calls, especially in the last months of the Italian Social Republic, was certainly not amorous flirtations—it was no longer the time for that—but rather dramatic political, military, and diplomatic issues. These included Mussolini's relations with Winston Churchill, through intermediaries. After all, Wolff himself maintained similar relations on his own behalf, even traveling incognito to Bern to negotiate with the Americans the surrender of the German Army Group South. So why did the Italian government refuse to allow those who had legitimately requested to consult the Petacci correspondence to read it?
Probably because the requests began after April 25, 1995, when the post-communists and their allies had already taken over the government. Unfortunately, Luciano Garibaldi and Alessandro Zanella were unable to make their requests before that date, as the 50 years required by law for the protection of state secrets had not yet elapsed.
In fact, since they contained 'state secrets', according to the Supreme Court ruling, the 'secrecy' itself should have ceased on April 25, 1995. Instead, the ploy resorted to first by the State Archives, then by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, and finally by the Ministry of the Interior, was that, since the diaries contained 'purely private situations of individuals', the secrecy had to be maintained for 70 years. This was a mockery, aggravated by the fact that, according to official documents, the decision had been made by a few ministry bureaucrats who had determined that the diaries "did not contain information relevant to the two scholars' field of research." In essence, Claretta's diaries did not mention the British or Winston Churchill.
How could these conclusions be trusted? Unless the most important pages had been torn out of the diaries. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is plausible, supported by the author's work as a historian, who, in 1982, having gained access to the diaries of the
Minister of National Education of the Italian Social Republic, Carlo Alberto Biggini, he could only note the absence of the most valuable notebooks, those that most likely referred to the contacts between Mussolini and Churchill.
But how did Claretta's papers end up in the hands of the Italian state instead of her legitimate heir, her sister Miriam? It is a story straight out of a novel.

An extraordinary historical document

April 19, 1945. On Lake Garda, and throughout Lombardy, it is a cold, rainy day. The Stefani agency (the ANSA of the time) has sent out a news flash on the teletype machines announcing the Allies' breakthrough of the Gothic Line. Benito Mussolini, 61, head of the Italian Social Republic (RSI), leaves Villa Feltrinelli in Gargnano to go to the Prefecture of Milan, where a decision will be made on what to do (surrender or fight to the last man). Before leaving, he advised his mistress, Claretta Petacci, 32, who was spending endless days in solitude at Villa Mirabella, Gardone Riviera, inside D'Annunzio's Vittoriale, to stay safe in the villa, which was guarded by the Germans. He would contact her to tell her when and how to flee to Spain with her family.
But Claretta cannot resist. Dressed in a blue suit, an embroidered silk blouse, and a beaver fur coat, she begs her attendant, German SS lieutenant Franz Spògler, to drive her to Milan in the Volkswagen military truck at the young officer's disposal. Spògler obeys and takes her to Milan, to Piazza San Babila, on the corner of Via Matteotti (then Corso Littorio), where Claretta's parents and sister Miriam live in a rented apartment, about to flee to Spain. They hope that Claretta has decided to join them, but she immediately disappoints them: "I came to Milan to be close to him." Only to her sister Miriam does she reveal that she entrusted Carlo and his wife to the care of the Swiss ambassador before leaving.

join them, but she immediately disappoints them: "I came to Milan to be close to him." Only to her sister Miriam does she reveal that, before leaving, she entrusted Carlo and Caterina Ccr-vis with what was most precious to her in the world: two boxes containing 600 love letters sent to her by the Duce over a period of twelve years, as well as a diary that begins in 1932 (the year in which the woman, then 21, met Mussolini) and ends on the day of her departure for Milan, April 18, 1945.

Since the previous October (i.e., October 1944, the date of his transfer from Villa Fiordaliso, the scene of a dramatic scene made by Donna Rachele, to Villa Mirabella), the Cervis couple had become his best friends and confidants. Villa Mirabella belonged to Countess Maria Gallese di Montenevoso, widow of Gabriele D'Annunzio, and Caterina Cervis was the countess's lady-in-waiting. The Cervis couple and Claretta therefore lived under the same roof. Claretta spent her endless days, waiting for Mussolini's increasingly rare and hurried visits, at the table in a huge living room, writing pages and pages of her diary. In those pages, Claretta notes down everything that the Duce confides in her, by letter or by telephone: not gossip (that time is over), but political, military, and diplomatic information. And extreme hopes for salvation. Those pages are, therefore, an extraordinary historical document.
A few days later, her parents and sister Miriam left for the military airport in Ghedi, where a plane was waiting to take them to Barcelona. As she gave them a final hug, Claretta slipped an envelope into her sister's handbag, saying, "Please, don't open it until you get to Spain." Miriam could barely hold back her sobs. That letter contained Claretta's will. Here is the full text:
"Don't worry about us. I am following my destiny, which is his. I will never abandon him, no matter what happens. I will not destroy the supreme beauty of my offering with a cowardly gesture, and I will not
I will give up helping him, being with him as long as I can. You know where all my papers are. Keep them and respect them. Keep them: I entrust them to you, and you, in turn, will entrust them to your son, if God gives you one, or to Benghino ["Benghino" is Benvenuto, her favorite nephew, the eldest son of her brother Marcello, who is six and a half years old]. You will understand which of the two will be able to understand them. You who have lived my whole life of love, you who have seen me since I was very young, you who have been the little "peacemaker," the "provisioner," our "little idiot" of happy days, you know everything. No one better than you can be the guardian of my writings. You will find his letters. They are part of me, a sacred memory and indivisible property. Please, whatever happens, make sure that the truth is finally told. Don't cry about what I'm telling you. It's not pessimism or melancholy: it's a desire to know for sure what is most dear to me. Only you can understand me.

(Un)buried at all costs

April 19, 1950. When, after several years spent in terror (who in the Petacci family could not have been afraid of suffering the same fate as Claretta and her brother Marcello?), the young Miriam returned to Italy and presented herself at the Cervis home with her sister's letter in her hand, she was told that the Carabinieri had preceded her and seized everything. Who had tipped them off? It was never known, although a journalist from *Corriere della Sera* was long suspected of having gained the Cervis family's confidence, including the news that Petacci's papers were buried in the villa's garden. And it was precisely by digging in the garden that the Carabinieri found the two boxes.
From that moment until her death in 1991, Miriam Petacci never ceased to claim ownership

of the papers. But all her efforts, her legal battles, and her appeals to various ministries were in vain. Just as vain were the attempts made over decades by Claretta's only living heir, her grandson Ferdinando, son of Marcello, who was murdered in Dongo. Ferdinando, who lives a dignified but poor life in America and who, despite having had his father killed (and in practice also his only brother, Benvenuto, known as 'Benghi', since seeing 'dad' torn to pieces by the crowd drove him mad and he died at a very young age), is still denied by the Italian state an inheritance that is rightfully his.
The official justification? A ruling by the Court of Cassation on April 12, 1956, which attributes the papers to the state "as they contain references to Italy's foreign and domestic policy." The same state which, however, at the end of the 50-year period imposed on 'state secrets', refused, as we have seen, to make them public, due to the purely 'private', personal nature of their contents. Silence must therefore be maintained, and it does not matter if, depending on the circumstances and the applicants, blatantly contradictory reasons are given for this purpose.

Enzo Tortora's promise

Shortly before her death, Ferdinando Petacci received from his aunt Miriam a passionate letter from Enzo Tortora, which shows how the famous television presenter and journalist, who was the victim of judicial persecution in 1983, had fought generously, in keeping with his character, to ensure that Miriam could regain possession of her sister's

diaries. The letter is dated 'Milan, May 29, 1985': it was therefore written after the innocent Enzo Tortora had been sentenced in the first instance to 10 years for drug trafficking, and

the full acquittal that would be pronounced the following year by the Court of Appeal of Naples. At the time Tortora wrote to Petacci's sister, he was a member of the European Parliament, elected in the Milan constituency on the Radical Party list with 500,000 preferential votes.

"Dear Miriam," Tortora wrote, "I don't know if I will come out of this daily agony alive, but if I do, I make you a promise. I will fight like a wild beast to ensure that those letters and diaries are returned to you and that the shame of this moral plunder ceases. Otherwise, what kind of 'honorable member' would I be? You are fighting, dear Myriam, against what I have always hated: hypocrisy, cowardice, lack of true moral structures. But we will talk about this."

Tortora then had bitter words for the sadism of the journalists who had hurt Miriam by repeating old and well-known slanders; the same or similar to that small group of "special correspondents" who welcomed the news of his own conviction by toasting with champagne. He concluded: "These headline makers, these filthy 'intellectuals' would sell their own mothers for a bit of press: I know them. I've experienced them all firsthand, one by one. And that's why your tragedy, so much greater and more bitter, appeared to me even more clearly in its livid, atrocious light. But, alas, so Italian. What else can I say? I embrace you, dear Miriam, in the name of pain."

THE BIGGINI "MYSTERY"

Minister and confidant

Dino Campini writes in *Strano gioco di Mussolini* (Milan, 1952): "Before newspapers and weekly magazines began publishing rumors about Mussolini's correspondence, a clergyman, Monsignor Vittore Maini, attorney general of the Milan curia, had asked me about it. As if nothing had happened, he had asked me in a low voice if I knew anything about letters from Churchill to Mussolini. [...] The question was asked as if by chance, but it was no coincidence, since I had been, in a way, the secretary of Minister Carlo Alberto Biggini, a friend, who had been entrusted with a copy of those letters that were so dear to Churchill. I later learned from various sources that it was believed that I was fully aware of, and perhaps in possession of, those papers. Various people came, with excuses, to inquire about those documents."
Fabio Andriola writes in *Mussolini-Churchill: carteggio segreto* (Casale Monferrato, 1996): "Mussolini had great confidence in Biggini, to whom he had entrusted important documents in the past so that he could write the true history of the relations between fascism and the Catholic Church up to the Conciliation of 1929: his is the *unpublished History of the Conciliation* that appeared in February 1942, 'unpublished' because it was based on documents personally handed to him by Mussolini in December 1939. It is therefore easy to imagine that Biggini was the man entrusted with writing, once tempers had calmed down, *the unpublished history of Italy during the Second World War.*
While Musso

entrusted documents with specific political aims, more or less immediate, for Biggini the aim was more long-term: to demonstrate, with documents in hand, how things had gone. Mussolini must have thought that people would listen to him. He was the most suitable person both for his personal prestige and his age (he was only 43 in 1945), as well as for his abilities and the undisputed loyalty he had shown to Mussolini even in the most difficult moments.
Several prominent figures of the time attest to Carlo Alberto Biggini's status as Mussolini's chief confidant in their memoirs or history books written immediately after the war: Ermanno Amicucci, editor-in-chief of *Corriere della Sera;* Nino D'Aroma, director of the Istituto Luce; Edmondo Cione, founder of the Raggruppamento Nazionale Repubblicano Socialista (National Republican Socialist Group), but above all Dino Campini, for whom Biggini's secret papers, which mysteriously disappeared, and the minister's sudden and premature death became a real obsession, as can be understood by reading his two books, written twenty years apart: *Piazzale Loreto,* the most recent, which followed *Mussolini's Strano gioco (Strange Game)* of 1952.
In these two testimonial books, Campini recalls all the hints Biggini gave him (until a few days before his death) about the papers he received from time to time from the Duce. Starting with this one, which dates back to the fall of 1944: "He revealed to me that Mussolini gave him the documents, the supporting evidence, of his interventions with the Germans on behalf of the Italians. And he told me that he also entrusted him with papers that did not concern the Germans: this was the first mention of the shadow line documents."
But here are some other references: "The references to Mussolini's vague and mysterious agreements with the British were always clear in Biggini's speeches. [...] He spoke to me in a veiled, sickly voice: 'If those documents have fallen into certain hands, you can see
. No one knows their importance, no one knows those secrets." And it was clear from other phrases that these were not Hitler's secrets but Churchill's. [...] Every time I went to see him at the clinic, we talked about the shadow line documents, wondering where they had ended up. He had left them in a red morocco leather briefcase at Villa Gemma in Gardone. He had never left that briefcase before, and just when he shouldn't have left it, he lost it. It seemed that Biggini was hoping for a miracle, but I didn't know how to perform one. [...] From the context of the conversations, from many phrases, from increasingly precise indications, it became increasingly clear to me that the documents that concerned him were those relating to the relations between Italy and England, between Mussolini and Churchill.

Fascism: the 'third way' of an 'anti-fascist'

Born in Sarzana, Liguria, on December 9, 1902, Carlo Alberto Biggini graduated at a very young age in Law in Genoa and Political Science in Turin, with teachers such as Gioele Solari, Giuseppe Rensi, Francesco Ruffini, Guido De Ruggiero, and Benedetto Croce. They were not just his professors, those who gave him honors on his transcripts and two degrees with 110, honors, and dignity of printing. They were his true mentors, his friends and personal admirers, and he admired them as a devoted and grateful student, ready to learn, but also ready to give. The time to give would soon come, when the theory of the corporative state would persuade him that Fascist Italy was writing a new and revolutionary page in the conflict of socio-economic ideas that had been tearing apart the best minds of European universities for at least two centuries.
Biggini's conversion to corporatism was a considered decision, the result of in-depth study and scientific comparison. It can be said that

Biggini, a democrat by vocation and a Mazzinian by training and thought, 'became' a fascist because he saw in fascism the synthesis of two visions of the economy and society, the communist and the capitalist, otherwise destined to clash mercilessly and, above all, for him, a peaceful man, without peace. In 1934, he was elected to Parliament in the district of Sarzana, and in 1937, he obtained his first position in corporate law at the University of Sassari. From then on, it was a crescendo. Writer, historian, pamphleteer, highly influential orator, volunteer in East Africa, promoted to captain of the infantry for war merits, member of the Commission for the reform of the civil code, the commercial code, and the navigation code, president of the Chamber's Labor Commission, director of the Higher School of Corporate Sciences at the University of Pisa, and finally, at only 39 years of age, Rector of the University of Pisa, with the auspices, support, and blessing of Giovanni Gentile, who considered him one of the young minds of "non-fascist" fascism.
His political career was also prestigious: Minister of National Education for the first time on February 6, 1943, when he took over from Giuseppe Bottai, he voted against the Grandi agenda at the Grand Council on July 25, 1943, and, after Badoglio's "40 days," joined the Italian Social Republic, holding the same position. He remained faithful to his first oath, even though he was deeply convinced of the impending defeat.

Corrections in blue pencil

At the Council of Ministers meeting on November 24, 1943 (the same Council that decided to rename the new fascist state the Italian Social Republic), he was given the task of drafting a new Constitution and delivering it to the Duce

"by December 15," as they wanted to convene the Constituent Assembly as soon as possible.
Biggini therefore had just over two weeks to draft the document. He worked day and night, without interruption, infusing the 142 articles of the text with his culture, which some commentators have described as "inspired by the social doctrine of the Church." History tells us that examination of the document was postponed when, on December 18, 1943, the Council of Ministers decided that the Constituent Assembly would be convened after the end of the war. At that time, there was no indication that the end would be as catastrophic as it was for the Axis forces. However, Mussolini put those 52 typewritten pages in his bag (they were found and published for the first time by the author of this book in 1983), took them to Villa Feltrinelli, where he lived, read and reread them, modified them in some places with a blue pencil, and finally returned them to the author with a letter of approval. This allows the historian to hypothesize that this vision of the state was truly assimilated by Benito Mussolini, who had recently and dramatically emerged from the experience of twenty years of dictatorship.
The second paragraph of Article 36 of Biggini's Constitution states that the Head of State "is elected by the Constituent Assembly. He remains in office for five years. He may be re-elected." But at that very point there is a correction in Mussolini's own hand, a correction and an addition: "He remains in office for *seven* years. He may be re-elected *only once."*
This could mean that even the Duce wanted a presidential republic, and—as was later the case with the 1948 Constitution, which is still in force today—he too was thinking of a seven-year term. But, assuming that the office would certainly go to him (and contradicting the wish of his young minister, who—thanks to the principle of indefinite re-election—envisioned Mussolini as president for life), he added those three words: "Only once."

, predicted that Mussolini would be president for life), he added those three words: "Only once."
In short, if Mussolini had survived in an Italy not torn apart by civil war but having emerged from the conflict with dignity thanks to a negotiated peace (a hypothesis that was far from far-fetched, at least in 1943), he would have retired after a maximum of another fourteen years in power. This would have meant, for him, retiring from politics at around the age of 75. Just as today, bishops retire from active life in the Church at the age of 75.
Legislative activity would have been carried out by a single Parliament, called the 'Chamber of Representatives of Labor', composed of 500 deputies 'elected by direct universal suffrage by all citizens over the age of 18'. Therefore, there would be no unnecessary duplication of the House and Senate, with the associated costs of maintaining so many parliamentarians, but a single chamber, where deputies—this time nominated by political parties—would be "free and unquestionable in the exercise of their functions," would have remained in office for five years, and above all would always have had to vote "openly," as each deputy would have had to take responsibility for their own actions, thus preventing the phenomenon of "franchi tiratori" (rebels). Voting rights for 18-year-olds, at a time when the age of majority was 21, was certainly an innovation. It was equally significant that Biggini had introduced full recognition of the Church into the Constitution of the Italian Social Republic and proclaimed the Roman Catholic religion as the religion of the Italian State, exactly as would happen on January 1, 1948, with the new Italian Constitution, after the strenuous battle fought and won by De during the Constituent Assembly of 1947 to have the new Republic recognize the Lateran Pacts in Article 7 of the Constitution.
Biggini had agreed to undergo this extraordinary *tour de force* out of pure personal loyalty to the Duce, not because he felt he was a fascist, let alone a republican fascist. This position caused him problems, but also advantages. Problems such as complaints to the party's disciplinary committee and persecution by the Germans. Advantages such as having carte blanche from the Duce, who, through him, was able to save hundreds of people (soldiers, intellectuals, members of the Resistance, especially Jews).
Many would later attest to his courageous interventions—which were successful, in unity of purpose with Gentile—to protect colleagues, writers, and professors, saving them first from confinement and then from deportation to Germany; to give them work and food; to prevent their careers from being destroyed. And above all, to try to avoid the bloody epilogue of civil war, in a contest of noble efforts, which saw his friend Corrado Bonfantini (who was always reluctant to talk about it after the war, "because otherwise Pertini would get angry," as he told the author of this book) on one side of the barricade, and, on the other, alongside him, Giorgio Pini, Edmondo Cione, Carlo Silvestri, and, according to him, Benito Mussolini himself, who coined this poetic image for Biggini: "Sometimes even in a puddle of mud a flower can bloom."

The mystery of death

Carlo Alberto Biggini died at the age of 43 in a clinic in Milan, struck down (so his widow was told) by cancer on November 19, 1945. No autopsy was performed, nor did the family receive any medical records. These omissions, which are serious in relation to any patient and any family, are also strange in the case of such an illustrious figure.

According to his secretary Campini, Carlo Alberto Biggini was the custodian of one of the copies of the Mussolini-Churchill correspondence. Unfortunately, the minister was unable to take the documents with him to the Basilica of St. Anthony in Padua, where he found refuge on the evening of April 25, 1945. He kept it in the private residence that had been assigned to his family, Villa Gemma, on Lake Garda, and hoped that his wife and sister-in-law had taken it with them. But the two women, terrified, had left the villa to take refuge with the bishop of Brescia, without taking anything from the minister's study.
When, in 1983, the author of this book published *Mussolini e il professore (Mussolini and the Professor),* a biography of Carlo Alberto Biggini, he had carried out a preliminary investigation to find out who had taken the 'red morocco folder'. The Brescian antiquarian Aldo Triboldi, owner of Villa Gemma, told him: "I handed over the papers, kept in two or three small boxes, to Professor Michele Tumminelli, who introduced himself to me immediately after the Liberation as a friend of the minister." Tumminelli (a member of parliament, friend of De Gasperi) was still alive in 1983. He was 90 years old and lived in Milan. The author of this book tried to approach him, but his son, Professor Mario, then headmaster of the school of the same name, did not allow it: "Dad is out of his mind now," he explained.

The author then had a long conversation with Professor Mario. "It's not possible," he asked, "that your father handed everything over to the British?" The answer was: "Knowing my father's national pride, I rule that out. I would not rule out, however, that he may have handed the papers over to some Italian authority, perhaps the marshal of the Carabinieri."

Michele Tumminelli, a neighbor and friend of the minister, became a Christian Democrat senator in the immediate postwar period and was closely linked to De Gasperi. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that, through De Gasperi, the copy in

Biggini's possession had returned to Churchill's hands. No offense to the non-commissioned officers of the distinguished force, but De Gasperi was certainly more authoritative than a Carabinieri marshal.

However, my investigation did not end with a single meeting. Biggini had fallen ill at the Santo: pancreatic cancer. It was devastating. He was taken under a false name to a clinic in Milan. Everything was organized by Father Agostino Gemelli, the founder of the Catholic University, who was indebted to the former Minister of National Education for the many favors he had received. The famous friar's secretary, Anna Tolentino, was still alive in 1983. The author of this book 'grilled' her, ...to no avail. Hard as a rock, she continued to reply: 'I never knew Minister Biggini, nor did I ever speak to him'. Yet the author of this book had written proof that the lady was lying. In fact, it was she who had assisted the minister until the end, which came on November 15 of that terrible year, 1945, while Biggini's relatives, due to the terror spread by the communists, remained hidden in La Spezia. Anna Tolentino died in 1992, taking with her to the grave the desperate echo of that continuous, insistent, hammering invocation that Biggini never ceased to utter, even in his agony: "The papers! My papers! Where are my papers?" This testimony comes from his former secretary, Dino Campini, and is reported in the book *Piazzale Loreto.*

Intrigued by this story, Fabio Andriola went to visit Anna Tolentino at her home in Rome in 1991, the year before her death. He recounts this in his *Mussolini-Churchill: carteggio segreto (Mussolini-Churchill: Secret Correspondence):*

"Father Gemelli's secretary did not want to make any statement, even denying to me that she had ever known Biggini and that she had gathered confidences from him that all the other people who had visited his bedside had gathered. Among the possible reasons must be the desire to follow through on

. On closer inspection, the secret of Anna Tolentino's stubborn silence is fully entitled to be included among the mysteries of the Mussolini-Churchill correspondence."

But even more intricate and dramatic is the mystery surrounding the circumstances of Carlo Alberto Biggini's death: a sudden, obscure death, not corroborated by any detailed medical records, and which must certainly have seemed providential to those who had an interest in drawing a veil over the correspondence affair.

The illness that struck the young Biggini in Padua was mysterious (pancreatic cancer, the friars told his lawyer, Paolo Toffanin, who was preparing to defend him in the inevitable trial that would sooner or later be held before a special criminal court). The then prior of the basilica, Father Lino Brentari, was reticent with the author of this book while he was alive, as if he too were carrying an unspeakable burden. The disappearance and then partial reappearance of the minister's diaries was mysterious, with only a small part being returned to the family by a member of the clergy: the part that was not compromising either for the British or for the Italians who had Carlo Alberto Biggini in their custody until the day of his death.

Even more mysterious—inexplicable—was the behavior of Father Agostino Gemelli, who, after having his friend, the former minister, admitted under the false name of "Professor De Carli" to the San Camillo clinic in Milan, wrote to lawyer Toffanin: "Professor De Carli, who was examined here, does not have any form of cancer"; and later, faced with the lawyer's insistence on meeting his client, he rebuffed him with this letter: "Professor De Carli cannot be approached by anyone. There are reasons for this that I do not know."

THE DEFINITIVE STORY OF "NERI" AND "GIANNA"

Born Luigi Canali

Luigi Canali, "Captain Neri," a key figure in Mussolini's capture, custody, and, above all, his delivery to the

"executioners," mysteriously disappeared on May 7, 1945. Since that day, he has been gradually forgotten, so much so that today his name is completely unknown to the general public, even to those interested in the events related to the collapse of fascism. But not to a small group of determined historians—from Franco Bandini to Giorgio Pisano, from Giorgio Cavalieri to the late Alessandro Zanella—who, on several occasions, have tried to investigate his role in those events, concluding that his tragic disappearance was due to his determination not to allow the Pei (the party he himself belonged to) to seize the treasure of Dongo. We are not talking about historians of the communist school, for whom his elimination was the result of a logistical error made by a party platoon unaware that the death sentence hanging over 'Neri' had been revoked in the meantime. Instead, we are talking about other scholars who believe that 'the captain', as a good Italian even before being a good communist, wanted the 'treasure of Dongo' recovered by him and 'Gianna' to be returned to the state. Or at least to those to whom it rightfully belonged.

The author of this book owes his in-depth knowledge of the character to the helpfulness and kindness of Alice Canali, widow of Grigioni and sister of 'Neri'.

in-depth knowledge of the character. It was in fact Mrs. Alice who made available to the author dozens of unpublished documents and letters from her brother which, while not revealing the reason for his death, tell us everything about his personality, allowing us to reconstruct the true story of the man whom fate placed on Benito Mussolini's path for the last appointment of his life.

Luigi Canali, who would become the leader of the Resistance in the lower Lario and Lecco areas, was born in Como on March 16, 1912, the eldest of three brothers. His father was from Brianza and worked as a nurse at the local hospital. His mother, Maddalena Zanoni, was from Brescia but grew up in Mantua. They were a family of socialists who, after the Livorno Congress of 1921, embraced communism and raised their children to worship freedom and justice.

Luigi Canali grew up healthy and strong, excelled in athletic competitions, especially in hurdling, and found work at a very young age as an employee at the Brunate funicular railway. He had a great desire to improve his education, read texts on religion, philosophy, and literature, and graduated as an accountant from evening classes. In 1936, he was called to arms and sent to East Africa as a second lieutenant in the Engineers.

A collection of unpublished letters and diary entries, made available to the author by his sister, show us the feelings that lay in the heart of the young officer sent to fight a war that, deep down, he found repugnant. These are beautiful letters and notes, which, on their own, deserve a chapter. "You want to make me a hero at all costs," he wrote to a female friend on April 22, 1936. "There will be half a million of us against half as many strong, poorly armed Negroes, without air support. They are dying by the tens of thousands. We are still making precise lists of the victims, so few are they. And yet we are the heroes. Personally, I feel that I have made greater material and moral efforts in civilian life, without anyone saying anything to me.

Have I been lucky? Then there are 499,000 lucky people in East Africa!"

Here is an excerpt from another letter: "The enormous value of discipline is obvious. However, I do not believe, nor can I remember, that peoples have achieved much through discipline alone. Indeed, I am sure that without a foundation in the economic, social, moral, or religious sphere, nothing truly lasting can be achieved. Moreover, I am convinced that, without such a foundation, discipline can only be implemented as a manifestation of fear and ignorance."

And here is a reply to a little girl from Como who had written a moving letter to the "dear soldiers": "Dear Parisina, you will certainly form your own idea of the war and our situation, but ultimately that is a good thing. Continue to call us 'dear soldiers' and pray for us. However, I would like to convince you of one thing: while we will know how to face everything with serenity, we must pray fervently to God to instill enough common sense in men to understand that wars are terrible, frightening things and should be the last things on their minds."

A family friend writes to him from Lourdes to try to instill some of her faith in him. Luigi responds with a beautiful ten-page letter from which we draw this thought: "You, because you are fundamentally good (as I must be fundamentally bad), do not believe it possible that such beautiful ideas as divinity and, for that matter, revelation and incarnation, could be the result of needs, fears, and necessities inherent in human nature, but made conceivable only by the imagination, under the nightmare of the fear of death, and handed down to us by our fathers as traditionally true."

In a long, passionate diary, which his sister has always kept as a relic, the young Luigi confides his feelings and inner conflicts: "I do not accept the inevitability of wars, just as I do not accept other theories of this kind, and I consider the attitude of the ministers of religions throughout the world to be highly culpable, who, when faced with such an event, elevate themselves to judge and condemn, from the height of their ministry, not the fact itself, which is frightening and uncivilized, but one or the other party in conflict, depending on the immediate interest that the politics of their religion can derive from it, thus mixing the name of God with the most vile and degenerate passions of humanity." On another date: "There are many steps on which morality could be based. On the last step that I see, for example, there reigns a morality that regards good as something to be done without hoping for material rewards, much less moral or spiritual ones, beyond the pleasure of having accomplished it."

And finally, a surprising note, with an almost prophetic flavor, dated April 27, 1936: "I am reading *Il padre del Duce (The Father of the Duce),* written by Francesco Bonavita, a lawyer and old comrade of Alessandro Mussolini. I think intensely about my father, about our fathers: about us, who lived with our eyes open in moments full of events and historical turning points; what a situation! The small, perhaps always momentary exchanges of the Duce's father make me think of the colossal one of his son: I hope to be able to 'see' him as gigantic, in the face of history, morality, and the higher values of humanity."

If these thoughts allow us to understand how high Luigi Canali's ethical and civic commitment was at only 24 years of age, we can imagine how mature he had become on September 1, 1943, seven years later, when, returning from the retreat from Russia, he returned to civilian life in Como, finding employment at Sic (Società idroelettrica comacina). In Russia, he had behaved valiantly, earning promotion to captain for his war merits. He had saved dozens of men from his unit and, as his sister recalls, 'he managed to bring home the thing he cared about most: a small trunk with his books'.

We read in a character reference written by his company commander during the war in Africa: "Due to his serious, loyal, strong-willed, and disciplined character, his moral integrity, and his generosity, he is highly regarded by his superiors and peers. He enjoys well-deserved prestige among his subordinates, whose work he knows how to inspire with activism, tirelessly setting an example, so as to achieve excellent results in all circumstances. He has excellent organizational skills, sound initiative, a practical spirit, finds solutions for every difficult situation, and knows how to remain calm in the most worrying moments."

This is the man who, after the rebirth of fascism in the north and the German invasion of Italy, gathered around him a group of veterans from Russia and soldiers who had been disbanded on September 8 and, with them, started the Resistance in the Como area. At first under the name Renzo Invernizzi, then, after June 1944 (when the Germans had already put a bounty on his head and he was forced to abandon his cover job at Sic), under the name 'Capitano Neri', which was to become popular among his comrades and feared by the enemy.

At the head of the Como Resistance

With the support of numerous communists from the Como area, Luigi Canali formed the 52nd Garibaldi Assault Brigade and became its commander. A second lieutenant in the Royal Army, Pier Bellini delle Stelle ("Pedro"), a finance police officer, Urbano Lazzaro ("Bill"), and a worker and champion of the local soccer team, Michele Moretti ("Pietro"), were under his command. Attacks on the enemy intensified, and the western shore of Lake Como was firmly held by Neri's Garibaldi fighters.

western shore of Lake Como was firmly held by Neri's Garibaldini. Here is the text (unpublished) of a leaflet that he had distributed in the streets of Como in response to an "advance" by the fascist authorities:

"Colonel Pozzoli [the RSI police chief in Como] recently sent the Garibaldini of the 52nd Luigi Clerici Brigade an invitation to surrender with their weapons, promising impunity [...]. We have 30 fallen comrades to avenge. When we have avenged them all, then we will negotiate, but we will negotiate only one thing: your unconditional surrender. Until then, we will speak to you only with the language of arms, and we expect similar treatment from you, because we despise contacts of any other kind."

During the harsh year of 1944, "Captain Neri" had thus become a legendary commander of the Resistance, and it is

strange that in historical texts, especially those of communist inspiration, his name does not appear, as it should, alongside those of Cino Moscatelli or Arrigo Boldrini. Unusual, but perfectly explainable: Luigi Canali, more attentive to his own inner consistency than an uncritical executor of the orders of others or, worse, of the party, proved, in short, to be an uncomfortable comrade.
This is revealed by Mrs. Alice: "His differences with the party were already apparent in 1944. Luigi had no regard for Pietro Vergani, 'Fabio', future deputy of the Pei, then commander of the Garibaldi divisions in Lombardy. Above all, he did not agree with the PEI's decision to place at the head of the Garibaldi formations senior officers from the army that had been dissolved on September 8, officers of monarchist faith, flanked by the party's 'political commissars'. Luigi was wary of these officers, who had taken to their heels on September 8, abandoning their men. He knew them well. Thus, he did not accept that the military command of the Garibaldi divisions of Lario, which he had created, should be entrusted to Colonel
in the monarchist Umberto Morandi ("Colonel Lario"). Luigi argued that this decision distorted the revolutionary character of Garibaldi's followers, who, once the war was over, should have carried on, in their daily political commitment, the popular momentum that had driven them to take up arms against the foreign invader. This was a fundamental political conflict which, in a rigid party such as the Communist Party, could only be branded in one way: deviationism.
But why had Longo and Togliatti included monarchist officers in the Communist formations? In order to have the army under their control at the time of the insurrection: a measure suggested by Soviet advisers. The insurrection then failed due to the intransigence of the Allies. The attempt was made nonetheless, on May 28, 1945, when a meeting was held at the CVL (Volunteer Command of Freedom) in Milan, during which General Trabucchi, commander of the Turin garrison, called for the dissolution of the army (made up of "combat groups") and its replacement with partisan formations. Cadorna, Pani, and Longo flew to Rome, but they were unsuccessful. The Americans had made it known that they would oppose such an attempt by force.
Therefore, more far-sighted than the party leaders, "Captain Neri" did not hesitate to clash head-on with "Fabio," even though his stance cost him the command of the Garibaldi formations of Lario and his replacement by Colonel Morandi. "Neri" had to settle for command of the 52nd Brigade.
It was during this period that "Gianna" entered his life. Small, pretty, with blue eyes almost like mother-of-pearl, doll-like eyes - as Alice Canali remembers her - this "gappista" from Milan-Baggio, where she was born on June 24, 1923, had to hide in the mountains to escape the fascists' hunt.
The Muti soldiers had discovered her activities (as an employee at the military hospital in Milan, she issued licenses to soldiers who did not want to return to the front), and had massacred her boyfriend, Gianni Alippi, 24, a member of the 3rd GAP, one of four shot in Viale Tibaldi on August 28, 1944. The Lombardy leadership of the Garibaldi formations then sent her as a courier to the 52nd.
Giuseppina Tuissi took on the nom de guerre 'Gianna' in memory of her boyfriend. At 21, she already knew what pain was: it was she who had to identify the battered body of her lover, brought to the morgue after the public execution, which took place in front of women and children.
It is difficult to say under what circumstances the spark of love between 'Gianna' and 'Neri' was ignited. Luigi Canali, married for just one year, was about to become a father, and his wife had certainly lost her most important support at a time of greatest need. It is certain that 'Neri's' wife could not understand how her husband could have chosen the hard path of clandestine struggle. She believed she had married a quiet accountant with a secure job at the hydroelectric company. There were even those who took it upon themselves to warn her of the arrival of that young and attractive partisan courier, who often left on risky missions alongside 'Captain Neri'.

In the dungeons of the 'repubblichini'

It was on the eve of one of these missions, which was to take place in neighboring Switzerland, that Luigi Canali and Giuseppina Tuissi were captured by the Black Brigade of Como. It happened in Lezzeno, on the night between January 6 and 7, 1945.

Some "small fry" who had fallen into the net had provided the Black Brigade with the addresses of clandestine bases.

The behavior of "Neri" and "Gianna" at the time of their capture and in the days that followed (terrible days of physical and mental torture in the former barracks of the Carabinieri of Corno-Borghi, which had been requisitioned) was a distillation of cunning and courage.
This is described in various reports written by the two young men shortly after their release and handed over to their superiors (but a copy remained with their families). Luigi Canali's memoir, 43 typewritten pages, is an authentic literary work and, at the same time, a chronicle that reads like a *thriller:* from the meticulous description of the torture devised by the Red Brigades, to the heroic behavior of "Gianna," who was herself tortured and beaten with a hundred lashes, then locked up for a whole night in a telephone booth with a rat, and finally stripped naked and mocked by her captors in front of 'Neri', who was forced to watch the ordeal in chains.
One after another, the leading figures of the Resistance in the Como area ended up in prison. We do not want to deprive the reader of this significant passage, which reconstructs the moment of the meeting, in the fascist prison, between 'Captain Neri' and 'Colonel Lario', who had also been taken prisoner:
"Colonel Lario entered the room and, after giving me a quick glance, approached the table where Mariani [Captain Enrico Mariani, commander of the Black Brigade] and his associates were sitting, greeting them deferentially. 'Do you recognize this man?' Mariani asked him. 'Yes, it's Neri,' he replied, red as a poppy. I replied with a sympathetic smile [...]. At first he was a little confused and stammering, but then he continued his explanation briskly, especially after he was able to describe the disposition of the men and the system devised for 'herringbone' connections, a phrase that never failed to strengthen his disquisitions on the art of war, giving him
the effect of a gargle. He posed as a victim of the communists [...]. He said that he had agreed to take command of the Group in order to curb its actions, adding that the communist members of the command were the real instigators and agitators of the actions, which he never approved of and, in fact, decisively prevented on several occasions. He said of me in particular that I was the only one who sent comprehensive reports, not only military but also political. When he was dismissed, Mariani concluded, addressing his acolytes: "In short, he is the true fascist."
Meanwhile, Dante Gorreri ("Guglielmo"), secretary of the clandestine Communist Party of Como, was also captured and taken to the same prison. "Neri" was sentenced to death. "We will shoot you at the Camerlata cemetery," they announced. One evening, he had the opportunity to escape, but he gave up, as he himself explains in his memoir: "Only Corbella [a black brigade member] remained. And here I made an unforgivable mistake. Corbella is an elderly man and I could have easily immobilized him in my own cell. But he was a 'good' soldier, the same one who always looked at me with compassionate eyes, who had given me his blanket, who had given me his bread and cheese that very night. They would surely have punished him."

His people 'revere' him, the British protect him

He managed to escape on the evening of January 29, with a five-meter jump in the snow, but on that date, incredibly, the leaders of the Pei had already spread the rumor, since the 25th, that "Neri" was a traitor, that "Neri" had not resisted in the fascist prison and had talked. This was slander, originating in Milan, where Pietro Vergani was in charge, and not in Como, where no one would have believed it. And, again in Milan, the slander found its sublimation in a death sentence issued in the back room

of a haberdashery shop owned by Mario Melloni's brother (the future "Fortebraccio" of *l'Unità)* by a communist "court" whose members include, among others, Pietro Vergani, Aldo Lampredi, and Giovanni Pesce: the flower of the communist Resistance. The sentence providentially allows the party to get rid of the troublesome "deviationist." A terrible bulletin was issued to the formations: 'Kill the provocateur Neri'.
What does it matter to those "judges" if the fascists, to avenge their defeat, torture "Gianna" beyond belief, arrest "Neri"'s mother, beat his uncle, who offered him a hiding place in Milan, to death, accidentally kill Eugenio Curiel, mistaking him for the elusive "Neri," and finally release "Gianna" to serve as bait and allow them to capture the leader of the 52nd Brigade who has mocked them? And what does Pietro Vergani care if the Garibaldini of Lario, led by Oreste Gementi ("Riccardo"), openly rebel against the death sentence of "Captain Neri," demanding his immediate rehabilitation?
Some reports and accounts that "Captain Neri" wrote for his superiors are painful testimony to those terrible weeks. In

them, along with first-hand and invaluable information on the defensive preparations made by the fascists in Valtellina in view of the last "stronghold," he does not skimp on bitter invective against the "monstrous injustice" to which he has been subjected, attributing it to the "incompetence, recklessness, and bad faith" of the leaders of the Lombardy Delegation, first and foremost "Fabio."

These are the fateful days when 'Neri', wanted by both the fascists and the communists, and unwilling to throw in the towel, approaches British agents and places himself under their protection and, at the same time, at their disposal. He knows more than one of them. On Lake Como, there are numerous villas built before the war by wealthy English families who came here to spend the winter.

These families left their possessions in the care of trusted individuals who, now that fascism was on the wane, wished to repay their trust, friendship, and loyalty. It is therefore not surprising that the British secret services were very efficient and organized in the area: their ties with the local population had long been established. Suffice it to say that one of the top organizers of Special Force No. 1, the administrative head of parachute drops for British military missions in the North, is in fact from Como, albeit of British nationality: Mr. Beauky, owner of a hotel on the lake until 1940, formerly a student in Italy; an intelligence agent who speaks the Como dialect perfectly and now holds the rank of captain in Her Majesty's army.

After managing to 'shake off' the Fascist police, and failing to reach a clarification with 'Fabio', it is under British protection that 'Neri' returns to Como, where, together with 'Gianna', he is welcomed like a brother by the Garibaldi fighters of the 52nd Brigade, whose command has in the meantime been entrusted to the very young Count Pier Bellini delle Stelle.

As for the absolute credibility that Luigi Canali always enjoyed among his men, it is sufficient to recall the testimony that "Bill" (Urbano Lazzaro), deputy political commissar of the 52nd Brigade, gave at the Padua trial on May 4, 1957: "For me and for 'Pedro', neither 'Neri' nor 'Gianna' were considered spies. [...] When they returned, they were immediately reinstated to their positions. In order not to humiliate 'Neri' in front of his comrades, who had the utmost confidence in him, given that, on orders from above, we could not restore him to command of the Brigade, we appointed him chief of staff. I believe that this did not happen very often. In fact, this position did not exist in the other Garibaldi Brigades."

In Milan, they could not ignore the delicate situation that had arisen and which required a quick reversal, either to restore Neri's honor or to avoid losing control of the 52nd Brigade. It was "Pedro" who confirmed this in his testimony on April 21, 1947, before the investigating judge of Como, Jasevoli: "The authority and prestige of 'Neri' among all of us were such that the command in Milan had to take note of the fait accompli, and about a month before the uprising, the counterorder arrived: 'Neri' was no longer to be executed, because everything had been clarified."

Arbitrator of the Duce and his treasure

And so, a commander (both officially and de facto) fully reinstated in his duties, a partisan leader of undisputed authority and prestige, that 'Captain Neri' whom the events of the morning of April 27, 1945, dramatically propelled into the heart of Italian history.

If the man who physically ordered Lieutenant Flamminger's German column to surrender, who negotiated with the German soldiers for five hours (convincing them that, in the event of battle, they would have no chance of escape) and who, in the end, allowed them to pass through to Switzerland on condition that they abandon the fascists to their fate, was 'Pedro', the real mastermind behind the dramatic negotiations was 'Neri'..

At that moment, the command 'staff' of the 52nd Luigi Clerici Assault Brigade consisted of four people: the commander 'Pedro', the political commissar 'Pietro' (Michele Moretti), the deputy political commissar 'Bill' (Urbano Lazzaro) and the chief of staff 'Neri' (Luigi Canali). The only one of the four who possesses the military cunning, experience, and "love" of risk to take a chance and win a colossal *bluff like* the one Flamminger fell for (who was led to believe that the road to the upper lake was littered with heavily armed partisans

armed to the teeth), the only one who can outwit the Germans is "Neri."

He was the real protagonist and master of events, until the moment when, at three o'clock in the afternoon on April 28, the nameless and faceless colonel swooped down on the square in Dongo with his platoon of communist partisans

from Oltrepò Pavese: 'Valerio', snarling like a wild beast, whoever he was, determined to quickly execute the only move left open to him: to shoot fifteen 'hierarchs' on the spot, Mussolini having already been assassinated.
"Neri" certainly knows how things actually went. Because after the surrender of Mussolini and the hierarchs, it was he who decided the fate of the Duce and his entourage, arranging their movements and transfers. It was he who decided to take Mussolini to safety in the Germasino Finance Police barracks. And it was "Neri" who ordered the ministers' luggage and suitcases full of gold, jewels, and currency found in Prefect Gatti's Alfa Romeo (the treasure that would go down in history as "the gold of Dongo") in a large room in the town hall on the lake, entrusting its custody, with a written order, to the only person he trusted blindly, "Gianna." He sends "Gianna" to Musso to collect everything left in the cars of the "Mussolini column." It was 'Neri' who gathered some employees of the Dongo town hall and placed them under 'Gianna's' orders with the task of drawing up an inventory of the seized goods. And it was 'Neri' who personally took delivery of Mussolini's two bags, the famous bags of the 'destinies of Italy'.
"Take good care of these bags. They contain the destinies of Italy": with these words Mussolini addressed "Bill" immediately after being spotted in Dongo, on the Flak truck, by the partisan Giuseppe Negri. "Bill" grabbed the bags without, at that moment, giving them the importance that me-
They believed, and he got rid of them almost immediately by entrusting them to the partisan Lorenzo Bianchi. Bianchi held onto them for about two hours, then handed them over to the man whom everyone recognized, in those unique hours, as the highest authority: "Captain Neri." (At the Padua trial, Lorenzo Bianchi, summoned as a witness, was reticent. Contradicting his own statements made during the preliminary investigation, he said that he had kept the bags "for no more than 10 minutes," that he had not checked their contents in the slightest, and, finally, that he did not remember to whom he had handed them over. During the preliminary investigation, however, he had reported that he had leafed through the files, albeit hastily, noticing a folder bearing Churchill's name).
Captain Neri secured the two bags (where? No one will ever know) and then returned to his exceptional prisoners. It was he (and not 'Pedro') who, during the night between the 27th and 28th, arranged for Mussolini, his head bandaged so as not to be recognized, to be transferred from Germasino to Brunate, above Como, to the villa of an acquaintance. 'Pedro' would later admit that he had only carried out 'Neri's' orders. What was 'Captain Neri' thinking on that night when the small convoy of two cars, carrying (in addition to himself) Mussolini, Petacci, 'Pedro', 'Gianna', Michele Moretti, and the partisans 'Lino' and 'Sandrino', set off on the unsafe Lario road to Como? He had a specific goal: to hand over the prisoner to those who had shown themselves to be his friends when the fascists and communists wanted to eliminate him, who had believed in him, who had allowed him to continue fighting for freedom and, finally, who had guaranteed the absolute honesty and transparency of his behavior. The handover of Mussolini to the victors was expressly provided for in the peace treaty. And Luigi Canali did not want the Duce to end up in the hands of the communists. Instead, he wanted him to be taken into custody by
his British friends. They were waiting for him in the house between Como and Brunate. At that moment, he was far from imagining that the British had a very different fate in store for Mussolini than an interrogation followed by a press conference in front of journalists and cameramen from all over the world. The author of this book was told on several occasions by 'Neri's' sister that Luigi Canali was totally opposed to any form of summary justice. In her words: 'In those days, the only person my brother confided in was our mother Maddalena. I was still in Mantua, engaged in the anti-fascist struggle alongside my husband, and I would only return to Como after Luigi's disappearance. To our mother, who later told me about it, Luigi said, lamenting the violent death of the Duce, that he did not agree, that he would not have wanted that end for Mussolini, and especially for Claretta Petacci, that a regular trial would have been preferable "because, Mom," he said with an expression of sadness and regret that our mother will never forget, "it's better to hear people talk." Recalling his words on several occasions afterwards, my mother and I thought that my brother, in those hours when he had been close to him, had certainly talked at length with Mussolini and had become convinced that it would be in Italy's interest to allow the prisoner to defend himself in a public trial. Churchill's men did not think so.
But let's return to the chronicle of that fateful night. Upon arriving in Moltrasio, the small group came to a halt. There was a setback: the motorboat that was supposed to ferry the Duce across the lake did not show up, and the sound of explosions could be heard from Como, accompanied by flashes of light: it was surely the 'Garibaldini' firing into the air to celebrate their victory, and there was a risk that the convoy would be intercepted. Once again,

, it is 'Neri' who makes a quick decision. He has to deliver Mussolini alive to the British, he does not intend to take any risks and will carry out the mission he has committed himself to. He will therefore hide Mussolini in Bonzanigo, at the De Maria house. Alice Canali explains this choice as follows: 'Lia De Maria was our foster sister. We had had the same nanny. My brother knew he could trust her and her husband blindly."

Once again, without asking questions, "Pedro" and the others carry out "Neri's" orders. It is around 3 a.m. on April 28. Benito Mussolini and Claretta Petacci are resting in the humble little room of the De Maria children. Leaving "Lino" and "Sandrino" on guard, "Pedro" returns to Dongo. "Neri," "Gianna," and Moretti, on the other hand, headed for Como.

Where are they going? Who are they going to see? Certainly to the headquarters of the Communist Party, which, as in all the municipalities of northern Italy, had just been set up in the former Casa del Fascio. Alice Canali would never know exactly who her brother met, who he spoke to, or what he said: "I can't say who he met at the new party headquarters or who he spoke to," she would tell the author of this book many years later, "but it's certain that he had a heated discussion with them. Once again, my brother was doing his own thing, opposing the party's plans." The reason for the dispute was the "treasure of Dongo." It was at that moment that Michele Moretti, until then a loyal supporter of "Neri," began to distance himself from his comrade. He realized that Luigi Canali was on a collision course with the party and returned to Dongo.

'Neri' and 'Gianna' remained alone in Como. All they could do was report what they knew to their British friends: that is, tell them where they had hidden Mussolini and give them all the information about the 'treasure' they had seized from the Fascists, inventoried and piled up in that room in the Dongo Town Hall. In this way, and in perfect good faith, the two lovers

'gave' the British secret service exactly what they needed: the means to achieve their goal (the elimination of the Duce and his mistress) with information that, if necessary, could prove very useful.

Certainly, "Neri" could not or did not want to reveal everything to his mother. Alice Canali: "He limited himself to confiding that he was disgusted by the behavior of the Communist Party and because - these were his exact words - 'these dishonest incompetents are ruining the whole movement.'"

In the early afternoon of April 28, "Neri" and "Gianna" were in Dongo, in time to see Aldo Lampredi ("Guido") arrive first, followed by "Colonel Valerio" with the firing squad commanded by Alfredo Mordini ("Riccardo"). Lampredi and then "Valerio" first approached "Neri" to ask him to vouch for them to Pier Bellini delle Stelle, who did not trust the newcomers at all. "Neri" knows "Guido" very well, he knows that he is the right-hand man of Luigi Longo, commander of the Garibaldi Divisions, and he understands that the sad mission they have come to carry out, on the orders of the party, cannot be opposed. Once again, he asserts his authority over "Pedro." And the men of the 52nd step aside to make way for the "executioners."

But this is the last time 'Neri' obeys the Pei. Once 'Colonel Valerio's' truck has left Dongo with its tragic load of corpses, Luigi Canali devotes himself entirely to finding the best place for the captured booty, the 'gold of Dongo'. As a first step, he signed a temporary delivery order for the "treasure" to the Communist Federation of Como and had it countersigned by "Pedro," "Bill," and Moretti. He then strongly opposed the plan, put forward by some Communist elements, to load the valuables onto a truck and then ambush the escort. It mattered little that the plan - of which he had been a witness -

Gianna to Captain Neri's sister - would have caused the killing of three partisans: the "disappearance" of the treasure would have been easily attributed to stray fascists, while Pei could have easily pocketed an endless fortune. "Neri" - again according to "Gianna" - managed to put a stop to the infamous initiative, but at the cost of a furious argument that certainly left its mark. "As long as I'm alive, you won't do such a dirty deed!" he shouted. And he ran to console "Gianna," who burst into tears at such a proposal.

"There was an immense amount of valuables: jewelry, money from all countries, billions," Luigi himself revealed to his mother a few days later. He added: "If it hadn't been for me, that stuff would have been lost, because I saw that every now and then something disappeared. I didn't think I'd find myself among people like that, Mom." In the days following the shooting of the fifteen "hierarchs" and the lynching of Marcello Petacci on the lakefront in Dongo, now powerless to oppose the daily massacres, "five per night," of the survivors of the "Mussolini column" taken from the Carabinieri barracks, "Captain Neri" saw everything he had believed in collapse around him. Locked in his office at

the PEI Federation in Como, three doors away from that of Dante Gorreri, provincial secretary of the Party, 'Neri' could only hold back his disappointment, doing what he could to curb the excesses of the new masters, both in Como and, as we shall see, in Milan.

The wrath of the Party

But the tension suddenly exploded into a furious argument with Gorreri. From the testimony of Onorina Garavello, former typist for the Pei, at the Padua trial on July 7, 1957, we learn that "Gorreri shouted that he was the boss. The 'captain

Neri' was shouting back that it would finally be seen which of them had betrayed the other. They were talking about money. Gorreri sent me away. Later, he threatened me: he wanted to know what I had understood." It is no secret that Luigi Canali openly accused Dante Gorreri of having "talked" at the time of his arrest by the Black Brigade, thereby obtaining safe passage to Switzerland. "Neri" was determined to get to the bottom of that story. He simply could not stomach the fact that such characters had subsequently dared to accuse him of betrayal: now they would see! And the allusion to "money" links the dispute to the treasures looted from the fascists, as authoritatively confirmed by "Neri's" confidences to his mother the night before, which she reported at the Padua trial, as we shall see later.
Meanwhile, Luigi still had something that Pei found very tempting: the Duce's secret papers. Alice Canali recalls: "On the evening of May 6, 1945, before going to bed, my brother confided in our mother, who was very worried about him. She felt he was in danger and had also noticed some unsavory characters hanging around our house. Luigi tried to reassure her and revealed that he still had 'a mission to accomplish'. The next morning, he said, he would take the Duce's papers to a safe deposit box, then retire from politics for good. "I am disgusted," he said. Then he added, almost talking to himself: "Of course, I won't be able to retire into anonymity right away. For a long time, the press around the world will be talking about these papers." The next morning, he left the house early. He would never return.
The situation for "Neri" suddenly took a turn for the worse, but the feeling is that everything had already been carefully planned. That same morning, "Pedro" met Dionisio Gambaruto, "Nicola," in Como, the head of the so-called "people's police," which would be dissolved by the Allies in mid-July.
From 'Pedro's' testimony at the Padua trial on June 13, 1957, their conversation can be reconstructed: 'Gambaruto informed me that he was only waiting for the written order to execute 'Neri'. He told me that he had already received the verbal order. I had the impression that at that moment 'Neri' was already in custody'. 'Pedro' searched everywhere for 'Neri', but did not find him. At that moment, the commander of the 52nd no longer counted for anything. The real power was in the hands of the Pei.

Whoever names "Neri" dies

While "Captain Neri" was being brutally murdered, "Gianna" was being held prisoner by the H3rd Garibaldi Brigade in Milan, in the former Generale Cantore barracks, on the orders of Pietro Vergani, "Fabio." On May 9, the day after 'Neri's' murder, 'Fabio' sent for her and coldly informed her that her man had been 'executed by a partisan unit in the mountains, in accordance with the old death sentence'. She, 'Gianna', could now return home to Baggio. She was to remain there and not dare to return to Como. The party no longer needed her services.
A novel would not suffice to recount the ordeal of this girl, whose only crime was to love "Captain Neri" and share his ideals of patriotism and justice. Vincenzina Coan, a dear friend of hers, received these heartbreaking notes from "Gianna," dated May 23: 'Dearest Vincenzina, unfortunately this letter will be poorly written because I am not sure of my current mental faculties. First the fascists and now my comrades, the men who lead my party, for which I have lived and for which I live, have contributed to making me this way. They have taken away my honor, they have made it almost impossible for me to live, and they have also taken away the loved one for whom I would have

willingly given my life. I don't think I will be able to bear my suffering for much longer. Even when you are as strong as I was in the past, certain blows to your dignity, to your ideals, when you feel accused of betrayal, when you see your comrade die like a coward, while you know that he lived for a pure ideal, you feel oppressed and you wish for death

[...]. Too many people are brutalizing our party, and they are trying to suppress those who see all this.
A few weeks after sending the letter, on June 19, 1945, determined to shed light on the end of "Neri," "Gianna" leaves for Como. In her purse she has the receipt for the "treasure" she demanded from the Pei leaders on the morning of April 29, after handing them the packages of banknotes, gold, coins, and jewelry. With that piece of paper in her hand, the poor woman thought she would be able to scare them, force them to tell the truth about her man's death, and publicly rehabilitate him. For four days, accompanied by Alice Canali, who had arrived from Mantua in the meantime, she travels the length and breadth of the lake, asking everyone for news of her 'Neri' and making sure they know that she is determined to avenge him. On the evening of June 23, she accepts a ride from two 'comrades' on a red motorcycle. The criminals promised to 'take her to see Neri's body'. Instead, they took her to Pizzo di Cernobbio and killed her there, then threw her body into the lake. This version, commonly accepted in the Como area, differs in some respects from the account previously reported by the secret witness F. D., but the dramatic ending remains the same. Alice Canali recalls: 'The next morning, my husband, who was as anxious as I was because 'Gianna' had not returned, went to the Party. While he was talking to the administrative manager Piero Mentasti, a certain Viazzi entered. 'Do you know what happened last night at Pizzo? My friend Della Torre was there with his girlfriend, and they saw a motorcycle with two
men and a girl. The trio went down the steps. Shortly afterwards, they heard a desperate cry and a gunshot. The two men went back up and left. Della Torre and his girlfriend went down the steps and found a newspaper covered in blood." My husband immediately realized that they had also murdered "Gianna." Then, beside himself, he shouted: "Be careful what you do, murderers! If you dare touch my wife, I will mobilize my partisans in Mantua and we will settle the score once and for all!" Today I know that I owe my life to those words of my husband. Everyone in Como understood that he meant what he said, just as he had seriously fought the Nazi-Fascists.
The deaths of "Neri" and "Gianna" marked the beginning of a horrific chain of murders whose victims had only one fault: they knew something about the first two murders, or wanted to shed light on them. Thus, Anna Bianchi, who had been a typist at the headquarters of the 'Lince gang' for some time, was murdered and thrown into the lake, as were her father Michele, a fervent communist who wanted to avenge his daughter; Eufrosina Fontana, who had gathered Anna Bianchi's confidences; Lina Chiappo, the former partisan courier "Dina" who, under torture, had "talked" to the Black Brigades and who, by the mere fact of her existence, automatically exonerated "Neri" from the false accusations made against him by the communist "court"; two partisans from Cinisello, "Magni" and "il Biondino," friends of "Gianna"; journalist Franco De Agazio, who in November 1946 began publishing in installments in his weekly magazine *II Meridiano d'Italia* the memoirs of "Neri" and "Gianna," obtained from "Neri's" mother, Maddalena. His killers, members of the armed group Volante Rossa, suspected that, with his investigations and his tenacity as an investigative journalist, he was uncovering the unmentionable.
Gianna's brother, Cesare Tuissi, who knew the truth about the deaths of Mussolini and Petacci, was
machine-gunned; hand grenades were thrown at a overly zealous non-commissioned officer of the Carabinieri, Brigadier Ettore Manzi, commander of the Dongo station, who was in charge of the initial investigations into the events of those days and who had done everything he could to spare the fascist prisoners entrusted to him. 'Pedro' and 'Bill' were lured into an ambush in early June in Gravedona and saved themselves by returning machine-gun fire.
The murder of Franco De Agazio - who was courageously replaced as editor of *Meridiano d'Italia* by his young nephew Franco Servello - and the brutal beating of Don Giuseppe Brusadelli, editor of *L'Ordine,* the Catholic daily newspaper in Como, achieved their intended purpose of intimidating the more aggressive newspapers, which had gone too far in their conjectures and revelations about the mysterious deaths on the lake. Among these were *L'Italia,* edited by Monsignor Pisoni (with articles by Arrigo Galli), and *Corriere Lombardo,* founded by Edgardo Sogno and edited by Angelo Magliano.
Those who never gave up were 'Neri's' mother and sister, who, with successive complaints and reports to the police and the judiciary, reported the names and surnames of those who ordered and carried out the crimes. But the state continued to remain silent. On November 10, 1945, the CLN (National Liberation Committee) of Como, in the persons of its president Enrico Stella and secretary Oscar Sforni (both non-communists), filed a complaint with the judiciary regarding the disappearance of the "treasure of the RSI" (Italian Social Republic). This was the starting point for an investigation which, after various twists and turns, concluded on October 6, 1949, with a ruling by the

preliminary investigation section of the Milan Court of Appeal to indict Dante Gorreri, Pietro Vergani, and 28 others for embezzlement, misappropriation of public funds, and multiple murders. However, due to a series of additional investigations and requests for legitimate suspicion, the trial only began on April 29, 1957,
before the Court of Assizes of Padua. The Pei had taken steps to secure the two men accused of being the instigators, Vergani and Gorreri, by having them elected as members of Parliament. The only person in the dock, in chains, was Maurizio Bernasconi ("Mirko"), the former deputy commander of the "people's police," one of the two accused of murdering "Gianna," arrested for a series of robberies. Here is the description of him by Franco Di Bella, correspondent for *Corriere della Sera* at the Padua trial: 'With his slanted eyes, like a Chinese mandarin, and slightly hooked nose, from the height of his 24 years in prison, he observes the trial with a detached attitude, like an English baronet might watch his horses in *the paddock* from the stands'.
The defendants charged with the most serious crimes were on the run. The two communist parliamentarians were at large. Although the aim was to seek the truth about the origin and fate of a huge treasure, the state did not bring a civil action. The honesty and firmness of the president of the court, Augusto Zen ("The fact that the fascist leaders," he dictated in the minutes, "did not leave all those valuables to Cardinal Schuster and took them with them was the cause of their downfall," he courageously declared), were not enough to shake the reticence of those who, like Cadorna, could finally have clarified the mystery of Dongo, but did not want to do so. Walter Audisio could afford to shout, "We will conduct the real trial, partisan leaders!" and Luigi Longo could boast with these words: "We communists are not accountable to anyone: we did not foresee, at the time, that the Resistance would end up in the dock."
It was decided, however, that the murderers of 'Neri', 'Gianna' and all the others, the perpetrators of perhaps the greatest theft in Italian history, would not have to pay. On July 24, 1957, one of the six jurors, 63-year-old Silvio Andreghetti, collapsed and was hospitalized. President Zen postponed
the hearing until August 5. A few days later, Andreghetti ("the one who," in Alice Canali's memory, "followed the events of the trial with the greatest participation and sensitivity") committed suicide in the hospital. 0 "committed suicide." The trial was postponed to a new date. And, for over half a century, it has still been waiting to be held.

Pasca Piredda, the final confirmation

The author of this book is indebted to Dr. Pasca Piredda for valuable information relating to historical research she undertook on Prince Junio Valerio Borghese. Pasca Piredda is an absolutely extraordinary protagonist in the military history of World War II. Spokesperson and close collaborator of the Minister of Popular Culture of the Italian Social Republic, Fernando Mezzasoma, she was 'kidnapped' by three young officers of the Decima Mas, who drove her from Salò to La Spezia in one night, introducing her to Donna Daria Olsufieff, the prince's wife, and instantly appointing her head of the press office of Borghese's formation. That adventure was too exciting, the ways and spirit of that military formation too romantic not to captivate the very young Pasca, who from that moment on became a key figure in the propaganda and information of republican fascism (see also Ricciotti Lazzero's book *La Decima Mas,* Milan 1984). Well, while the author was gathering episodes and memories of those events from Pasca Piredda herself, which had nothing to do with Mussolini's end or the treasure of Dongo, the figures of 'Captain Neri' and 'Gianna' unexpectedly appeared in the story. Thus:
'I was arrested by partisans of the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade in Piazza Fiume 2, while I was in my office, at the co-

under the command of the Decima, on the afternoon of April 29, while the bodies of Mussolini and the others who had been shot were still hanging from the gas station in Piazzale Loreto. The partisans took me to the premises of Sitra, a food company located along the Naviglio Pavese canal that had been turned into a prison, and handed me over to the jailers. Inside the building, a "people's court" had been set up, made up of individuals who called each other by their first names (I remember some of them: "Italo," "Carlo," "Valerio") and wore bright red scarves. They brought me before that "court" and all I had to do was declare my role within the Decima to be sentenced to death. The execution was set for the following morning, April 30. I will always remember that terrible night, spent in a damp, dark basement, with the partisans' machine guns constantly pointed at me and a dozen other unfortunate souls, also sentenced to death, crammed into an adjoining room. And the insults that were constantly hurled at us.
Dawn came and they dragged us outside, towards the bank of the Naviglio canal. I walked quickly, despising them. At

that moment, I didn't care about anything anymore, not even dying. Suddenly, a hand grabbed me by the arm: "Come with me! I have to question you!" He was a young partisan commander, around 28-30 years old, handsome, completely different from the thugs who were about to shoot our group. He led me into a small hut where there was a table and some chairs. A girl, a partisan, was sitting on one of them. "I know you were Borghese's press officer," he said to me, "aren't you afraid of dying?" With these words began the conversation that saved my life. After the first few words, he introduced himself: "I am Captain Neri," he said, "and this is Gianna. How did a girl like you get involved with those fascist scoundrels?""And you, how did you get involved with these individuals who are only looking for a bloodbath?"
?" (Meanwhile, we could hear the bursts of gunfire with which the partisans were ending the lives of my unfortunate cellmates). "Captain Neri" frowned, then said to me, almost with pain: "Did you see them? Unfortunately, the revolution got out of hand. They put a red scarf around their necks and now they enjoy seeing people suffer, killing them. But I only know three or four of them. The others are ruining everything. Listen, I don't want you to be killed. I'll save you."
He, the communist partisan commander, grabbed the phone and dialed a number, asking to be put through to someone, a foreign name, certainly English or American, which I didn't catch at the time and don't remember anyway. Once he had them on the line, he asked them to send a jeep as soon as possible "because I have someone here to pick up and take to your headquarters." No more than fifteen minutes passed, during which time "Captain Neri" asked me a few questions about the Decima, then, to my great surprise, the door swung open and two British officers entered and asked me to follow them. I was taken by car to a building and put up in a small room. I immediately realized that it was an Intelligence Service headquarters. They were hunting for Prince Borghese and wanted me to help them find him. After a few days, they handed me over to a team from the American OSS, and I followed my destiny, which would end in freedom after a short period of imprisonment. I heard nothing more about "Captain Neri" and "Gianna" until much later, when one day I was summoned by General Leone Zingales, the military prosecutor in Milan, who questioned me about the circumstances of my meeting with "Neri" and asked me if he had told me about the gold in Dongo. No, he hadn't mentioned it, and I couldn't help the general. But since then, I have never forgotten the man who saved my life, that communist commander who worked with the British.

ORIGIN AND END OF THE 'DONGO GOLD'

"I would be interested to understand," asks Peter Tompkins, one of the now increasingly large group of historians who have opted for the "British trail" in the death of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci, "why for fifty years the Communist Party has endorsed a convenient version and vetoed the subject" *(Il Messaggero,* August 31, 2001).
Let's try to help him understand. In Urbano Lazzaro's ("Bill") book, entitled *Dongo, mezzo secolo di menzogne (Dongo, half a century of lies),* there is a vivid and almost cinematic first-hand account of how, in the early afternoon of April 28, 1945, in the large room on the ground floor of the Dongo Town Hall, the decision was made to carry out the executions that would soon take place on the lakeside promenade. The affectionate dedication with which "Bill" accompanied a copy of the book at the time authorizes the author of this book to reproduce the most dramatic central part in its entirety. We read:
"'Pedro' turned to 'Valerio' and told him [...] that not a single Garibaldian from the 52nd would take part in the execution. 'Valerio' listened attentively to 'Pedro' and, as 'Pedro' spoke, his face took on a displeased and angry expression. 'All right!' he replied angrily. 'Let's look at this list of prisoners now!'. He read aloud 'Benito Mussolini!' and immediately added 'to death!', drawing a cross next to Mussolini's name. 'Pedro' and 'Guido' remained silent. There was a suffocating atmosphere in the office, as if
the air had become unbreathable. "Valerio" continued: "Clara Petacci: death!" But in the list of 31 prisoners given to me the night before by "Pietro" and which I returned to "Pedro" when he returned alone to Dongo on the morning of April 28, Petacci's name was not there. Mussolini was 30th on the list. While it is acceptable that "Colonel Valerio" read Mussolini's name first, marking a cross next to it, he could not do the same with Claretta Petacci's name, because

it did not appear on that list.
We could stop here, because this testimony—which, strangely, has escaped historians until now—from one of the main actors in the drama would already be sufficient to prove that "Colonel Valerio" already knew everything: he knew that Claretta was dead, he knew that he would have to take responsibility for her death, he knew that he would have to lie for the rest of his days. But let's continue, so as not to deprive the reader of the flavor of that tragic farce.
"At that point, 'Pedro' felt compelled to intervene, and he did so promptly and decisively. 'Valerio!' he said, 'I don't think it's right for you to condemn a woman to death just because she was the Duce's lover! ' Valerio looked at him with contempt and anger. 'I alone,' he exclaimed, 'decide who should and who should not be shot! Barracu: to death!'. Another cross. "But Barracu is a soldier, a gold medalist from 1915, you can't shoot him. And besides, I don't think he's done anything wrong!" snapped "Pedro." "He was undersecretary to the president of the Council of Ministers of the Republic, and that's enough to erase even the purest and most valiant past!" replied Valerio. "Liverani: to death! Coppola: to death! Utimpergher: to death! Daquanno: to death! Captain Calistri: to death! Mario Nudi..." "Wait a minute," Pedro interrupted, "I would point out that Captain Calistri was not captured by us on the column or on the armored car, but presented himself voluntarily at
We asked him to carefully examine his position. And this shows that he has a clear conscience. And besides, he wasn't part of the Salò government! "He was on the column, and that's enough," Valerio replied brusquely. At those words, Pedro stood up angrily and exploded: "Then shoot the drivers, the women, the children, the ministers' wives, just because they were on the column. This is inconceivable!" Pedro had never lost control of himself before, but faced with Valerio's absurdities, he could not restrain himself. Valerio, at Pedro's vehement words, also stood up, pale with rage, and, banging his fist on the table, shouted, "I repeat that I alone decide here! And enough with these intrusions and comments! I don't want to hear another word! Understood?" "Pedro" looked at him with pity, wondering how the general command could have entrusted such an important and delicate task to such an individual. [...] "Mario Nudi: to death!" continued "Valerio." "Pavolini: to death! Mezzasoma: to death! Romano: to death! Zerbino: to death! Bombacci: to death! Paolo Porta: to death!" And next to each name he drew a cross with a black pencil. Valerio's voice was growling and had a slight tone of satisfaction: he seemed overcome by a mania for justice. "Pedro" felt as if he were living through the days of terror of the French Revolution. He was distraught. But he understood that there was nothing he could do. "Valerio" suddenly said: "They should all be shot: round them all up and be ready to hand them over to me immediately! [...] Hurry up as soon as possible. Then we'll go together to get Mussolini and Petacci."
This vivid and unforgettable testimony proves that, at 3 p.m. on April 28, "Valerio" had already been informed of the killing of Mussolini and Petacci by a commando unit in the service of the British, and had already made the decision (or received the "suggestion") to proceed with the immediate "execution" of the "fifteen plus one" in Dongo and the subsequent execution of the two corpses.
execution" of the "fifteen plus one" in Dongo and the subsequent execution of the two corpses. From the tone with which he took control of the situation, it follows that he and his leaders must be held responsible for the events from that moment on. This includes the decision that would soon be made regarding the destination of the "treasure" found in the fugitives' cars and piled up in the town hall, the amount and origin of which he had been very well informed about.

What has been said to date

The great *Dongo robbery*. This was the title given by the American magazine *Life* on January 17, 1949, to an investigation by journalist John Kobler, who for the first time quantified the treasure of the Italian Social Republic stolen by the Italian Communist Party after the capture of Mussolini and the column of leaders fleeing Milan.
According to Kobler (who knew what he was talking about, having been part of the OSS, the US secret service, during the Italian campaign), the treasure, including precious stones, Italian lire, foreign currency, coins, and gold bars, amounted to $66.2 million at the time, broken down as follows: 61 million dollars (in Italian lire, coins and gold bars, jewelry, and valuable currency) were the 'reserved funds' of the Italian Social Republic; 4 million dollars (in lire and marks) were the 'German funds'; finally, $1.2 million (in lire and Swiss francs) were Mussolini's personal funds, almost entirely represented by the proceeds from the sale to the industrialist Gian Riccardo Cella of the newspaper building in Milan, with the adjoining Same printing works, in Piazza Cavour.

This wealth - reduced by an estimated 20% pocketed by the less noble among the partisans who took "cu-

ra' of Musso and Dongo's prisoners and their luggage - would never have reached its natural destination, the Bank of Italy, but rather the coffers of the PEI. According to that *Life* investigation, it was used to support the two election campaigns of 1946 and 1948 ($14 million), to purchase the building in Via Botteghe Oscure ($1.3 million, including restoration work), and the rest to finance clandestine military forces and build the impressive apparatus of provincial federations, sections, and cells throughout Italy. It is important to note here that all subsequent reconstructions, including the authoritative one by Urbano Lazzaro, the partisan 'Bill' (*L'oro di Dongo,* Mondadori, 1995), do not deviate from that old but very accurate reconstruction by *Life.*

The Italian state remained completely inert in the face of the communist initiative. Five reports sent to Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi at the end of 1945 by the police chief of Como, lawyer Luigi Davide Grassi, and the prefect, Virgilio Bertinelli, went unheeded. The same fate befell a report made 'to His Excellency Sceiba' by the former agent of the secret services of the Ministry of the Interior of the Italian Social Republic, Rosario Boccadifuoco, one of the survivors of Mussolini's column, who claimed to be able to 'recognize those who stole the treasure of Dongo'. De really did not want to bother Pei.

In 1949, during the preliminary investigation that preceded the Padua trial, which went down in history as 'the Dongo gold trial' (and which, as we have seen, was interrupted by the mysterious suicide of a juror and never resumed), Pei presented an inventory showing that he had actually received from the 52nd Garibaldi Partisan Brigade, which had captured Mussolini's column, "128 million lire [equivalent to 13 billion in 2000] used to liquidate the Garibaldi formations." But the commander of the 52nd, Pier Bellini delle Stelle ("Pedro"), with his characteristic courage, said in Padua at the hearing on June 5, 1957: "This inventory included only a tiny part of the mountain of valu

courage, said in Padua, at the hearing on June 5, 1957: "That inventory included only a tiny part of the mountain of valuables piled up on the tables of the town hall in Dongo." He added: "That list certainly could not include a room and a half of stuff. Everything else that is not included in it went to someone. I don't know if it went to Pei or someone else, but there's no escaping that" (from the trial report by Franco Di Bella, *Corriere della Sera,* June 6, 1957). And the president of the court commented bitterly: "We understand, the only ones who knew were 'Neri' and 'Gianna'."

'Captain Neri' had been murdered by the communists (official admission by Pei) a few days after overseeing the collection of the Dongo treasure. His partner 'Gianna' (Giuseppina Tuissi) had followed suit a few weeks later. And that was only the beginning of a bloody series of murders that were never solved.

What will be said tomorrow

For decades, the "treasure of Dongo" has been referred to, in line with early Italian and foreign news reports, as the "secret fund of the RSI." Those banknotes, gold bars, gold coins, and even jewelry (watches, rings, necklaces, bracelets) were allegedly stolen from the state for the benefit of Mussolini and his fleeing henchmen. The fact is that, as the scholar and researcher Riccardo Lazzeri proved in his in-depth and meticulous study entitled *Economia e Finanza nella RSI (Economy and Finance in the Italian Social Republic*, Milan, 1998), "there was not even a gram of gold belonging to the state. The gold reserve was located in Fortezza, at the headquarters of the Bank of Italy, where it was recovered intact." Similarly, the legend of the fe-

of gold donated to the homeland by Italian women in 1935, at the outbreak of the war in Africa, which were allegedly hidden in some secret trunk by Mussolini and his "looters," only to reappear in the column of Dongo, has long since met the miserable end befitting a childish fairy tale for stupid children: those wedding rings had in fact been immediately melted down and transformed into gold bars to support the war effort. Among the "treasure of Dongo," however, there were several gold wedding rings. But they were not those from 1935.

Urbano Lazzaro reported *(L'oro di Dongo,* Milan 1995): "When, late in the evening of April 27, 'Captain Neri' and 'Gianna' arrived in Dongo, 'Pietro' immediately informed them of what had happened before his eyes in Musso and the surrounding area [where unsavory characters had begun to get their hands on the luggage left unattended in the cars of those who had been arrested]. It was then that the formidable trio from the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade sprang into action and, thanks to their recognized authority, quickly managed to recover most of the loot [...] Everything that 'Pietro', 'Captain Neri' and 'Gianna' managed to recover was transported to Dongo and stored in a room on the first floor of the

town hall.
Did 'Neri' and 'Gianna' immediately realize that this treasure was not the 'reserved fund of the RSI'? Did the temporary custodians of the treasure, namely Prefect Luigi Gatti and Secretary Mario Nudi, reveal the origin of those valuables to him? Whatever the case may have been, it was decided that at all costs (including human lives) the truth about the 'gold of Dongo' must not be revealed. And so it would be decades before the most incredible hypothesis about the origin of that treasure emerged.
In *Memorie del commesso di Mussolini* (Memoirs of Mussolini's Clerk) by Quinto Navarra (Longanesi, Milan, 1983, p. 286), there is a passage
in the attentive reader: 'On the morning of the 23rd, Prefect Gatti left [Gargnano] taking with him several suitcases and many packages of confidential documents. Those suitcases contained Mussolini's so-called treasure, consisting of 65 kilos of scrap gold and several hundred thousand foreign banknotes (pounds sterling, dollars, Swiss francs, pesetas, and marks). The gold had been seized in Abruzzo from Jews who had taken refuge there. It consisted of rings, chains, medallions, and bracelets, and not all of it was of good quality. This gold remained at the disposal of the Minister of the Interior, Buffarini-Guidi first and then Zerbino, until Mussolini wanted it close to him."
How was Navarra able to testify to these things? Because, although old and ill, he was in Gargnano and regularly visited Villa delle Orsoline. Alessandro Zanella explains it well *(L'ora di Dongo,* p. 91): "Quinto Navarra, dean of the Duce's clerks, in service until July 25, 1943, was on Lake Garda and closely followed the events of the Private Secretariat, which he knew both from direct experience and because his son, Lamberto, worked there, occupying the eighth place in the hierarchy of about sixty officials, ahead of Werther Samaritani himself and his father." And it is again Zanella who is the first to draw conclusions about the true extent of that "treasure," how it ended up in the secret rooms of Gargnano, who went to retrieve it shortly before the end, and why it was transported in Mussolini's convoy: "Secretary Gatti," says Zanella, "left Milan at around 7:30 p.m. [on April 23, 1945]. He arrived in Gargnano after about two hours, accompanied by Mario Nudi, Pietro Carradori, and boxer Antonio Brocchi, his loyal bodyguard. He had time to meet with Donna Rachele. The others had dinner in the Secretariat canteen. [...]. Carradori reports that they picked up the six leather suitcases, fifty by sixty,
to transport the valuables. Those suitcases [...] had been brought from Rome when the Administration had been transferred to Lake Garda. In Rome, they had been entrusted to Colonel Modesto Mileti, chief archivist of Palazzo Venezia, who had not gone to Gargnano. The valuables consisted of a series of packages sent to the Ministry of the Interior by the provincial heads, starting with those of Latina and Frosinone and going up the peninsula as far as Bologna, which was excluded at the time of the evacuation to press the enemy. The contents (gold, Swiss francs, pounds sterling) and the province of origin were indicated on the outside of each package. As long as Buffarini remained in office [February 21, 1945], these valuables were kept at the Ministry, in the Maderno Guesthouse. When Zerbino took over in February 1945, this treasure was collected by Dr. Samaritani, who took it to the Headquarters at Villa delle Orsoline, where it was gathered and stored. At Headquarters, the treasure was kept in order, divided into packages according to the provinces of origin (Prosinone, Rome, Terni, Viterbo, Grosseto, Siena, Florence, Pistoia, La Spezia), in an office next to the archive, which was always guarded by two soldiers. [...].
Some [historians loyal to the vulgate] have suggested that the treasure consisted of wedding rings donated to the homeland in 1935, but Carradori firmly denies this. The Duce's aide goes further and points to the Chief of Police Tullio Tamburini [unpopular with the Germans and dismissed on June 19, 1944, at the behest of Wolff, who then, to take revenge for the dismissal of Buffarini-Guidi, had him arrested together with Eugenio Apollonio, an official of the Ministry of the Interior and member of the Duce's secretariat, and both were deported to Dachau]. Tamburini is said to have had the idea when it became clear that the Germans were 'hunting down Jews and plundering them of everything: furniture, paintings, jewelry, gold, money, even foreign currency, and anything else they thought could be useful'.
." Carradori also states that there were gold bars in the treasure, "and I don't think they were obtained by Italians melting down the precious items they had seized. I think rather that the Jews themselves had bought that gold in bars with the idea of being able to hide or transport it more easily. The gold wedding rings donated to the Fatherland had been deposited at the Mint in Rome at the time. There were no Mint deposits in Gargnano." The fact that Mussolini ordered these assets to be concentrated at his headquarters, where he could defend them from Wolff and Rahn, lends credence to the hypothesis of Quinto Navarra and Carradori. [...] One question remains: why did Mussolini want the

treasure to be transported to Milan? It is likely that the detailed list of valuables, made by Gatti on the night of April 23, was in accordance with Mussolini's instructions, who intended to return those assets. Perhaps, as Carradori argues, it was an act of goodwill to demonstrate his intention to conclude the surrender negotiations. "This is why the six suitcases were transferred to Milan: to be handed over to the Allied authorities at the time of surrender." In essence, Mussolini intended to negotiate with the Allies using the Jewish valuables as a bargaining chip to assert the autonomy of the Italian Social Republic from German interests. However, it can be ruled out that he intended to appropriate them. "If Mussolini had wanted to steal those valuables, he would have had them hidden in Gargnano or Milan." Carradori confirmed these considerations to the author of this book.

But here is further confirmation in Urbano Lazzaro's book *L'oro di Dongo (The Gold of Dongo):* "The chief of police of the Italian Social Republic, Dr. Tullio Tamburini, had arranged for the transfer, in great secrecy, of the valuables, especially the precious ones, that the fascist police had accumulated through the systematic plundering of the many Italian Jews who had been arrested, detained, or, worse still, handed over to the terrible hands of the German SS." Also in the book

"Bill," on p. 28, the statement given to the investigating judge of Como by the official of the Ministry of the Interior of the Italian Social Republic, accountant Raffaele La Greca, chief cashier of the police of the Italian Social Republic, is reported: "When the organs of the Republic of Salò, in the imminence of the Allied occupation of Rome, moved to the north, the then chief of police, Tamburini, took with him jewelry worth hundreds of millions belonging, it seems, to Jews who had been robbed."

According to the testimony given at the Padua trial by Dr. Werther Samaritani, whom no one asked if he knew the origin of those valuables, the suitcases taken by Gatti contained 66 kg of gold, 2,150 gold pounds, 147,000 Swiss francs, 16 million French francs, 10,000 Spanish pesetas, as well as an unspecified amount of British pounds, US dollars, Portuguese escudos, florins, and other foreign currencies.

Apparently, all the members of Mussolini's column, from the prefects to the last of the drivers, knew that these were goods belonging to Jews. It was only logical that they immediately pointed this out to the man who, with determination and authority, proceeded to seize them: 'Captain Neri'. Moreover, their very packaging (heavy paper packages stamped with the prefectures of origin—then called provinces—and an indication, albeit not quantitative, of the contents) should have prompted a person who was not naive (and "Neri" certainly was not) to ask questions: what are these valuables, where do they come from, where were you taking them, what did you intend to do with them? After all, why on earth would the prefectures of Teramo or Ancona, Prosinone or Arezzo, and so on for dozens and dozens of packages and parcels, ever have banknotes and gold wedding rings, ingots and Swiss marenghi coins, necklaces and bracelets? Everyone in Italy knew this -

it had even been published in the newspapers – that the legislation of the Italian Social Republic (RSI) had provided (Police Order No. 5 of the Ministry of the Interior issued on November 30, 1943) for the arrest of Jews, their internment in special collection camps, and the seizure of their property. And that, a few weeks later, the seizure had been turned into confiscation. That these measures had been entrusted to the police, therefore to the police headquarters, and finally to the prefectures whose stamps appeared on the packages now piled up in the room in Dongo.

Did the communists who arrived in Dongo know that what would later be called "the treasure of the RSI" consisted of goods looted from Jews? And was this perhaps the real reason for the conflict between "Captain Neri" and "Gianna" and their party comrades? A conflict that turned into a deadly tug-of-war between those who knew and wanted to reveal everything and those who knew and wanted to keep everything quiet in order to keep everything for themselves. It is not possible to answer these questions with certainty, especially since this work has no intention of slandering or defaming the freedom fighters who were then members of the PEI and those who passed through its ranks or other Resistance formations. We can only speculate. It can be assumed that no one in the fascist column felt comfortable revealing the nature of the treasure to 'Captain Neri'. It can also be assumed that 'Neri', having learned the truth and informed his British contacts of this detail, asked for their intervention so that the goods could be returned to their owners, but received a *response* that was completely contrary to his expectations: 'We have decided on a *"do ut des" arrangement:* they give us the Duce's papers and take responsibility for Petacci's death, and we let them keep the Jews' gold'. These are hypotheses, mere hypotheses, but they do make sense.

After all, Pei's silence with Moscow on the contacts between Churchill and Mussolini was indispensable in the new phase of international diplomacy, outlined at Yalta. In any case, while Mussolini's death at the hands of the British is plausible but remains shrouded in mystery, the fate of the gold in Dongo seems to be certain. Massimo Caprara, journalist, historian, and secretary to Paimiro Togliatti during those years, testified in his articles and books (in particular *Quando le Botteghe erano oscure,* Milan 1997, and *Pei, la storia dimenticata,* Milan 2001) to the great taboo that the "treasure of Dongo" always represented for the party. He recalled, among other things, how Togliatti, in an interview with *L'Unità*, which was then acquired by the Padua court during the futile trial, had stated: "The claim that Mussolini's column was loaded with Italian and foreign currency is an invention." He revealed that the valuables looted on the road between Musso and Dongo, brought to the municipality of Dongo by "Captain Neri" and meticulously catalogued by "Gianna," all ended up in the party's coffers. From there, an expert lawyer proceeded to launder everything in Switzerland. This is how Caprara remembers it: "He came to Rome every fortnight and stopped to chat with me while waiting for Togliatti to be free. On each visit, he performed a peculiar triangulation that could not fail to intrigue me: after visiting us on the second floor, he would go up to the third floor to the administration and then to the fourth floor to Pietro Secchia. It was that same lawyer who, one day at lunch, explained the mystery to me: he was busy laundering the Dongo loot by turning it into deposits and securities at certain Swiss banks, which could then be reused in Italy."

In *the afterword* he agreed to write for this book, Massimo Caprara not only confirms the atmosphere of mystery that reigned in the upper echelons of the PEI around the Dongo gold, but also brings other important content to the search for

historical truth. First and foremost, the revelation that the 'Audisio version' was 'a deliberate falsehood', and the unpublished account of the meetings between Churchill and Togliatti, which perfectly illuminate the conclusion of Mussolini's long correspondence and suggest that the Italian communist leader had already chosen the West long before Enrico Berlinguer's Atlantic option.

The question remains as to why "Neri" and "Gianna," assuming they had learned of the true origin of the "Dongo gold," did not confide in those closest to them: their families. A plausible answer could be their desire not to expose them to the risks they themselves were running. However, a careful re-reading of testimonies and documents reveals that they did say something. Maddalena Canali, 'Neri's' mother, at the Padua trial, recalling her last meeting with her son on May 1, one of the few days that 'Neri' was still allowed to live after the day in Dongo, stated (from the interrogation transcript): 'He came home that day. He was very sad, but we didn't discuss certain things. In the evening, we went to bed: I could see that he wasn't happy. When he came home, he always had a little party. But that day he was worried. 'What's wrong?' I asked him. And he replied: 'How can you be happy? I found some dishonesty...'. At this point, the president (who unfortunately did not think to ask what those "certain things we did not discuss" were) asked: "Did he tell you what that dishonesty consisted of?" Maddalena Canali replied: "That famous gold arrived and there was a heated discussion with Gorreri..."

President: "Did your son tell you anything about the Dongo securities?"

Maddalena Canali: "'Listen, Mom,' he said, 'these dishonest incompetents are ruining the whole movement. I saw some

things... There was stuff there, an immense amount of valuables, jewelry, money from all countries, billions, Mom... I didn't think I'd find myself among these people, Mom... Now, however, I have to do a transaction at the bank, an important transaction, and I want to do it myself and only myself."

President: "And did he carry out that transaction?"

Maddalena Canali: "He left and I never saw him again. And when he didn't come back, when he didn't come back..." Maddalena Canali's voice trails off in a sob.

As for "Gianna," she also said something. After receiving the order to stay away from Como, she wrote a letter to "Bill" and asked her brother Cesare to deliver it to the addressee. But the letter ended up in the hands of Pietro Terzi "Francesco" and was never delivered to "Bill." What message did it contain? In his book *L'oro di Dongo (The Gold of Dongo*), 'Bill' says he is absolutely convinced that it concerned the treasure that ended up in the Pei coffers. He recalls the testimony, again at the Padua trial, of Vincenzina Coan, 'Gianna's' friend and confidante: 'One day 'Gianna' revealed to me that 'Fabio' had ordered her to stop taking an interest in 'Neri', otherwise she would meet the same fate.

She added that, as far as 'Fabio' was concerned, everyone was a spy, but that she also had something up her sleeve and, if they didn't tell her what had happened to 'Neri', she would spill the beans'.
Finally, a curious detail: at the Padua trial, the fascist witnesses, the various Samaritans, Tamburini, La Greca, and their other former comrades, carefully avoided revealing that those valuables belonged to Jews. Why? Were they ashamed of their past or afraid for their future?

MEMORY. THE 10-POINT 'TRAIL'

1. 'Colonel Valerio' - who, according to history books, was the accountant Walter Audisio, but according to 'Bill' (the partisan commander who captured the Duce of Fascism) was Luigi Longo, number two of the PEI, but who even today no one knows who he really was - arrived in Dongo in the early afternoon of Saturday, April 28, 1945, and announced in the public square that he had received orders from the CLNAI (National Liberation Committee of Northern Italy) to execute "Mussolini and the ministers of Salò" on the spot. He did not obey the letter. Having found Mussolini already dead, he "shot" the corpse, and as for the others, he did not limit himself to the "ministers of Salò," but in order to make up the numbers (and even fifteen was not enough), he had an Air Force captain, an employee of the Ministry of the Interior, a journalist, an old former communist, and so on shot.

2. There was no order to shoot Mussolini and his ministers. The CLNAI, the legitimate representative of the Bonomi government in northern Italy, had not issued any death sentences, which were not within its jurisdiction, nor any orders of execution. Sandro Pertini, representative of the Socialist Party within the CLNAI, in a speech broadcast on the radio at 8 p.m. on April 27 (several hours after the news that Mussolini had been captured) and rebroadcast at 1 p.m. the following day (Mussolini was already dead), said: "He must be handed over to a people's court for judge him in a summary trial. He must be and will be executed. This is what we want, even though we think that the firing squad is too much of an honor for this man: he deserves to be killed like a mangy dog." Without the "rabid dog" but with a similar reference to the need for a "court," were the statements made by the representatives of the Action Party, Leo Valiani, the Christian Democrats, Achille Marazza, and the Liberal Party, Giustino Arpesani. Ferruccio Parri, still in hiding in Switzerland, was on the same wavelength, adding: "As for those shot in the square in Dongo, whom 'Valerio' chose according to criteria I am unaware of, it seems to me that several of them did not deserve that end at all." In fact, the CLNAI was required to comply with Legislative Decree No. 142 of April 22, 1945, which concerned "crimes committed by Mussolini and fascist ministers" and established the CAS (Extraordinary Assize Courts) to judge them. Why should the CLNAI have acted illegally? To rebel against the Lieutenant's government? There was not the slightest reason to do so. And that, faced with a fait accompli, namely the killing of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci by the British services, following frantic and convulsive agreements with Rome, the CLNAI was forced to stammer out the ridiculous posthumous claim, conceived, signed, and released to the press on April 29. It read as follows: "The CLNAI declares that the shooting of Mussolini and his accomplices, ordered by it, is the necessary conclusion of a historical phase that leaves our country still covered in material and moral rubble," etc., etc.

3. It would take more than a book to describe in detail the contradictions that accountant Walter Audisio (presented by Pei as "Colonel Valerio") stumbled upon in the 23 years he had left to live after that April 1945. But let's stick to the most striking ones, which have already been widely cited.
In the memoir dictated to *Unità* and published by the newspaper between November 18 and December 17, 1945, he dwelled with great emphasis on the exchange he had with Claretta when he refused to allow her to put on her panties. An episode which, as we know, was contradicted at the time by Lia De Maria, who was hosting the Duce and Petacci, and who revealed that Claretta must have already been wearing that undergarment as she was menstruating at the time. However, in Audisio's book *In nome del popolo italiano (In the Name of the Italian People),* published posthumously in 1975 (Teti Editore), the episode disappears.
Instead, other absurdities appear, such as Walter-Valerio insistently addressing Mussolini as 'tu' (you), even though he had led him to believe that he was a fascist who had come to free him. Finally, the book goes into detail in describing Mussolini's trembling cowardice in front of his "executioner," a detail denied by the communist partisans themselves, such as Michele Moretti, "Pietro," and Aldo Lampredi, "Guido." On January 23, 1996, *L'Unità* published the report on the events written by Aldo Lampredi, "Guido," a PEI official, and delivered by him in 1975 to the Honorable Armando Cossutta. The report shows that Mussolini, at the moment of his death, did not drool (Audisio's version), nor did he thunder "Viva l'Italia!" (Moretti's version), but shouted: "Aim for the chest!" This posthumous recognition by the

official communist organ of a man (Mussolini) who had been demonized for over half a century is inexplicable and without reason, coming from a person (Lampredi) who, until then, had given every indication that he had not even been present at the Duce's death. The fact remains that this significant statement was pulled out of a drawer after twenty-one years, in the midst of raging controversy over the "English hypothesis" put forward by the author of this book (and corroborated by the statements of Professor Renzo De Felice) and over the inconsistencies of the left-wing "vulgate."
The autopsy report on Mussolini, drawn up by Professor Caio Mario Cattabeni, notes that there was no food in Mussolini's stomach. This contradicts the statements made by both Walter Audisio and De Maria, who claimed that the prisoner had eaten milk, polenta, bread, salami, and fruit at noon on April 28. This detail supports the hypothesis that Mussolini could not have eaten that lunch because he was already dead at that time.

4. Why was the execution of the "fifteen" in Dongo carried out *in public,* while that of Mussolini and Petacci took place in secret? Why, in the second case, were all the inhabitants of the area sent away and no one allowed to witness it? The PEI and the CVL have never explained this.

5. There is a lengthy study (a copy of which, three hundred pages long, has long been in the possession of the author of this book) written by the late Professor Aldo Alessiani, for 40 years a medical examiner for the Court of Rome, from which - based on observations of the trajectory of the bullets and the rigor mortis at the time of the autopsy , it can be deduced that Mussolini's death can only date back to the morning of April 28 and that the shots could only have been fired from above and not from below, as would have been the case if the shooting had taken place in front of the gate of Villa Belmonte.

6. It is impossible to ignore the version of a highly authoritative member of the Resistance, Urbano Lazzaro 'Bill', deputy commander of the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade and the man who captured Mussolini, who, in his book *Dongo, mezzo secolo di menzogne* (Milan, 1993), meticulously reconstructs Mussolini's death, placing it on the morning of April 28 in front of the De Maria house and attributing it not to

Walter Audisio, but to the number two of the PEI, Luigi Longo, commander-in-chief of the Garibaldi Divisions.
In Franco Bandini's now "classic" text *Vita e morte segreta di Mussolini* (Milan, 1978), the deaths of Mussolini and Petacci are placed for the first time on the morning of April 28 in front of De Maria's house, while at 4:30 p.m., in front of the gate of Villa Belmonte, the two corpses of Mussolini and Petacci were 'shot again' to accredit the official version decided in the meantime during the frantic telephone calls between 'Valerio' and the leaders of the PEI and the CVL (Volunteer Command of Freedom).
As early as 1950, the great journalist Paolo Monelli, in his historical work *Mussolini piccolo borghese* (of which the author of this book has a copy given to him by Monelli with a personal dedication), highlighted the contradictions that made the 'official' reconstruction of Mussolini's death implausible.
The historian Alessandro Zanella from Mantua, who died prematurely, in his book *L'ora di Dongo* (The Hour of Dongo, Milan, 1993), reconstructs the shooting of Mussolini and Petacci as having taken place on the morning of April 28 in front of the De Maria house, carried out by 'Captain Neri' (Luigi Canali), the partisan 'Gianna' (Giuseppina Tuissi) and their comrades, basing his reconstruction on a contemporary judicial document he found, in which the brother of the partisan "Gianna" attributes the merit (or responsibility) for the event to his sister and "Neri." This may well be true even if the instigators or perpetrators were agents acting on the orders of the British services, as Bruno Giovanni Lonati openly stated.
According to the testimony of Dorina Mazzola, collected by Giorgio Pisano and published in the book *Gli ultimi 95 secondi di Mussolini* (The Last 95 Seconds of Mussolini) (Milan, 1996), Mussolini and Petacci were killed on the morning of April 28 outside the De Maria house in Bonzanigo.
In an interview given by Angelo Carbone, 83, to journalist Gaspare Di Sclafani and published in the weekly magazine *Gente* no. 19 on May 8, 1999, Carbone, a former partisan and friend of President Pertini, claims to have been present at the events and says: "It is not true that Claretta Petacci was killed with Mussolini in front of the gate of Villa Belmonte. It is a story invented from scratch."

7. At the ISMLI (Institute for the History of the Liberation Movement in Italy) in Pavia, there are two cassettes

recorded "for future reference" by two members of the firing squad in Dongo, Barbieri, former political commissar of Capettini, and Gardella, later mayor of Voghera. These recordings continue to be kept secret, and when the author of this book requested to listen to them, the director of the Institute, Professor Giulio Guderzo, politely but firmly refused. There is also a memoir "to be made public only after death" written by Ferrerò Vaisecchi, a member of the CLN (National Liberation Committee) in Como, and a similar document signed by the partisan "Sandrino," Guglielmo Cantoni, but the latter disappeared after Cantoni's death. What is there to hide after so long?
Guglielmo Cantoni, "Sandrino," had been left on guard by "Captain Neri" in front of the De Maria house together with his comrade Giuseppe Frangi "Lino." The latter died a few days later, killed by a burst of machine-gun fire. As for "Sandrino," he was allowed to live because he promised to forget forever what he had seen and heard that morning in Bonzanigo. This is proven by the painful testimony given at the 1957 trial in Padua, as reported by "Bill" (on p. 177 of *L'oro di Dongo):* "Here's 'Sandrino' again. Together with 'Lino', he had stood guard over Mussolini and Claretta Petacci in the De Maria house in Bonzanigo. At first, he denies that 'Neri' was present at

Mussolini's execution [according to the 'vulgate'], but is then forced to admit that he was there. He denies having been present at the execution and also having guarded the two corpses. I feel sorry for 'Sandrino': he lies in such a way that everyone is convinced he is lying, but he knows that the greatest risk he is running is to tell the truth."

8. There is a copious trail of blood that unites the many witnesses to the events in Dongo and Bonzanigo, and which quickly reaches those who attempt to investigate, perhaps to discover the fate of their loved ones. Meanwhile, the 'gold of Dongo' disappears, which, according to numerous testimonies, was the loot stolen by the fascist police from the deported Jews. The documents that Mussolini carried with him also disappear.

9. Some documents made public by SS General Karl Wolff offer more than just a hint of the effectiveness of the contacts between Mussolini and Churchill in 1944-45, which are also supported by multiple testimonies, giving a reliable indication of their nature. From some recordings of telephone calls and letters from Il Duce and Petacci in the possession of the high-ranking German officer, it is clear that Churchill had already identified Stalin as the greatest danger to the West in 1944 and was pressuring Mussolini to involve Hitler more on the Soviet front.
With the fall of the Reich and fascism, against the backdrop of the Yalta agreements between Washington, London, and Moscow, the British secret services would have had understandable reasons to draw a veil over those contacts between Churchill and Mussolini.

10. The death of Carlo Alberto Biggini, minister of the Italian Social Republic, personal friend of Mussolini and confidant, remains shrouded in mystery.

remains shrouded in mystery. He was admitted to a clinic in Milan for a severe form of aggressive cancer. But there are authoritative statements, such as that of Father Agostino Gemelli, which refute this diagnosis. What is certain is that Biggini died far from his relatives and those who assisted him in his final moments later denied any connection with him. Certainly, the main consequence of his disappearance was total silence on the documents that the Duce gave him in copy shortly before the end. Those documents, in the hopes of the leader of fascism, were supposed to save his life and justify Italian policy at the end of the war. Those documents disappeared and were of no help to Mussolini, let alone his loyal minister. The traces that point to the certain existence of secret correspondence between Mussolini and Churchill after 1940, which even pass through the sealed lips of the then Japanese ambassador to Rome, Shinrokuro Hidaka, lead to the bag received by Biggini. Anyone hoping to find evidence to support the arguments of this book would necessarily have to start with Biggini and that bag.

THE RELATIONSHIPS OF FEAR

"Imminent threat of death." From the report sent to the Ministry of the Interior by public security inspector Ciro Verdiani in November 1945:
"There is an imminent threat of death to anyone who knows too much, or wants to know, or speaks about the destination and possession of the so-called 'Duce's gold'."

"Neri was killed because he disagreed with the destination given to the Duce's gold and threatened to reveal it." From the "highly confidential" report sent on December 16, 1945, to Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi by the police chief of Como, Davide Grassi:
"There have been and continue to be endless speculations, investigations, and leads regarding the so-called 'Duce's gold'. Only the arrest of Michele Moretti, if questioned astutely, could shed some light on so much darkness; but it is to be feared that, if it is no longer possible to defend his hiding, Moretti will be made to disappear in the same way as 'Captain Neri', 'Gianna', a certain "Annamaria," and others who knew a lot or wanted to know a lot about the Duce's gold, or Moretti will give an explanation that will not lead to any positive results, and we will return to darkness.
Because it should also be borne in mind that, in any case, Moretti will have to be judged according to the rules of the current Code; moreover, the charge can only be that of
embezzlement to the detriment of who knows whom! Under these conditions, Moretti will very easily maintain absolute silence, given the bond that ties him to his party, even submitting to a sentence, which cannot be long, and always with the hope of being able to easily escape, following the code of silence that notoriously binds all members of the party itself, which has strong infiltrations in the civil police and among prison officers themselves.
[...] It is also certain, again from reliable sources, that 'Neri' was killed because he disagreed with the destination of the Duce's gold and threatened to reveal this information; the killing took place in Milan, on the orders of a certain 'Fabio' of the Communist Party, under the pretext of carrying out an old death sentence pronounced during the clandestine period by the secret partisan court.
It is also certain that the partisan "Gianna," Neri's lover, also disagreed with the destination of the Duce's gold. The instigator of the murder was allegedly "Fabio." The murder took place at Pizzo, between Cernobbio and Moltrasio: the perpetrators were "Captain Lince," now a fugitive because he is the leader of the Robecchi coffee gang in Como, and a certain Maurizio Bernasconi, currently detained in the San Donnino prison in Como, because he is the deputy leader of that gang. He was deliberately not questioned again about his involvement in the crime.
Connected with the disappearance of the so-called 'Duce's gold', there are numerous other murders or disappearances of people, from which it must be deduced that a very large and important organization wants at all costs to maintain the utmost secrecy about the current destination of the gold itself.
Among those who were killed is also the partisan "Lino," who was found dead in early May and who was made to believe that he had committed suicide, whereas, according to confidential information and the position in which he was found to have been hit by machine-gun fire, he must be considered to have been surprised and killed along the road to Dongo.
machine-gun fire, it must be assumed that he was surprised and killed along the road to Dongo.
From all the information and confidential reports received; from the events that have taken place and are still taking place; from confidential conversations with some leaders of the Communist Party; from their reticence, their surprises, and their contradictions, it must be assumed that the question of the Duce's gold cannot be isolated in itself, but is linked to a much broader and more important situation of a strictly political nature and of such a nature that, if full light were shed not only on the Duce's gold but on all the underground activities connected with it, senior members of that party would be irreparably affected, with consequences that are very difficult to predict today.
[...] The head of the secret organization is certainly "Fabio." [...] This organization has powerfully infiltrated the Como police force itself, including, among others, the current commander Vinci and deputy commander Invernizzi, who are known to visit the Russian Mission in Milan at least once a week. It is to this organization that the so-called Duce's

gold has undoubtedly flowed.

"Their final silence was achieved through death, having dared too much in rebellion and audacity. [...] Nothing concrete has been done about the complaint and the facts, at least by the political police authorities, either through complicity or fear. From the report sent on December 25, 1945, to Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi by the prefect of Como, Virgilio Bertinelli:
"Mussolini's so-called gold has become, in the Como-Milan area, a political issue and speculation, an element of struggle between parties, a reason for denigration and blackmail among local hierarchies, an insult and a defense among politicians
: the moral shame of the facts has no value. In the press and in meetings, one of the recurring reasons for controversy is precisely whether or not to have taken the Duce's gold, which is, in fact, a figure of speech, since the bulk of the valuables was the last prey snatched by the gang of fascist and German hierarchies, who, with him, attempted to climb the extreme valleys of the Alps towards the coveted Swiss refuge.
[...] On several occasions, in various places, in various ways and using various methods, the cars and fascist leaders were stripped of everything they were carrying or possessed: money, jewelry, suitcases, documents.
[...] With Moretti's arrest, it will be possible to trace the further path and destination of the gold, which, according to the information available, leads in various ways to the Communist Party of Como and Milan, to which and for which all the actors in this affair belong and operate.
[...] The Communist Party (as well as groups of the CLN and CVL, which strive, at every moment and on every occasion, and have even consecrated in letters to the authorities, to shed complete light on the facts relating to the Nazi-Fascist column) instead hides and removes the guilty parties from the law and prevents Moretti from speaking and being made available to the authorities.
Even more symptomatic is the death threat that has already been carried out against members of the Communist Party who rebelled or spoke out, or had the opportunity or intention to do so, such as 'Captain Neri', aka the communist Luigi Canali, and his lover 'Gianna', aka the communist Giuseppina Tuissi, and others, who disappeared at different times, allegedly killed on the orders of the Communist Party.
Jewelry and precious stones, valuables, and suitcases were taken from Dongo by "Captain Neri" and "Gianna" and brought to the Communist Party headquarters, where they were supposed to have the receipts. Their final silence was achieved through death, having dared too much in rebellion and audacity.
headquarters of the Communist Party, for which they must have had receipts. Their final silence was achieved through death, having dared too much in rebellion and audacity.
Tuissi's brother reported these events to the Allied Command in Como, and before that to the Milan Police Headquarters, naming [...] as the instigator, 'Fabio', who in real life was Luigi Longo, a member of the Communist Party in Milan. Nothing concrete was done about the complaint and the facts, at least by the political police authorities, either through complicity or fear. No report, even partial, exists from any authority.

'A general sense of silence'. From the testimony of lawyer Felice Camoni, a member of the commission appointed by the CLN (National Liberation Committee) of Como to shed light on the disappearance of the 'Dongo gold', at the 1957 trial in Padua:
'We came up against a general sense of silence, while threatening letters also arrived at the Commission. A man's life was worth less than ten lire at the time, and those who were to be questioned fled 300 kilometers away. If only we had had two carabinieri, things might have turned out differently'.

'Pushed to the wall by Colonel Valerio's men'. From the testimony of lawyer Davide Grassi, former police chief of Como, at the 1957 trial in Padua:
"In that chaotic situation, with Mussolini on the run, I was appointed police commissioner of Como, and I still don't know who chose me. My first act in office was to be put up against the wall by Colonel Valerio's men, in my own office, because I had defended a former OVRA agent whom they had found in the courtyard of the police headquarters and intended to shoot on the spot."

President: "Were you able to carry out any investigations during that period?"

Grassi: "An investigation into the disappearance of the 'Dongo gold'? But how could I have concluded it, surrounded as I was by a communist police force? The communists called the shots."

SPAMPANATO: A MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD

A journalist who died too soon to be able to consider the 'English connection' in the deaths of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci, but who wrote pages of remarkable political foresight, was Bruno Spampanato, to whom the author of this book owes, since 1964, his deep conviction that the 'vulgate' on the events in Dongo is false. In fact, 1964 was the year in which Spampanato, who had been an influential journalist during the Italian Social Republic, published his three-volume *Contromemoriale*. From volume III, page 133, we draw the acute historical judgment on the relations between Italy and Great Britain:

"Someone must have benefited from the upheaval in Italy, its relegation to second-rate power, its downgrading in the Mediterranean, its ousting from North Africa, which the Italians had grown accustomed to calling their 'fourth shore', its disappearance from East Africa, and finally the loss of what it had acquired in half a century. And only those who wanted this could want a military defeat, a painful contingency for any people, to take on the proportions and aspects of a political disaster for Italy. This was the story. England had been a friend to a modest and loyal Italy: and during the Risorgimento it had even helped it, when its counterweight served British policy in the European-Mediterranean balance. But the Italy of recent decades was already alarming to the British, and this latter Italy was considered an enemy since the war in Ethiopia. Since then, the British did nothing but postpone a deadline that arrived in 1945.

THE 'VULGATE' IS NOT TO BE TOUCHED!

On May 25, 1999, the author of this book was convicted of defamation in the press by the First Criminal Section of the Milan Court of Appeal. The ruling confirmed the conviction handed down on March 16, 1998, by the First Criminal Section. The proceedings were brought by the three children of the Tremezzo municipal employee who, on the mayor's instructions, had physically drawn up the death certificates of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci. These documents set the time of death at 4:20 p.m. The author of this book, in a report published in the weekly magazine *Noi* in 1994, had described the document as false. After the first instance ruling, the monthly magazine *Storia Illustrata* published the following note:

"As we go to press, we learn that the Court of Milan (First Section, presided over by Mannucci Pacini) has fined journalist and historian Luciano Garibaldi, a contributor to *Storia Illustrata,* for defamation, guilty of having described Benito Mussolini's death certificate as false. The defamation was allegedly committed against the signatory (who died in the 1950s) of the death certificate. We would like to point out that the document places Mussolini's execution at 4:20 p.m. on April 28, 1945, a time disputed by numerous authors, including Franco Bandini, Alessandro Zanella, Urbano Lazzaro (the "partisan Bill"), and Giorgio Pisano.

We await the reasoning behind the conviction and hope to discover why the Court rejected the

Numerous witnesses were called by Luciano Garibaldi's defense team, including Mrs. Dorina Mazzola, who in Giorgio Pisano's latest book *Gli ultimi cinque secondi di Mussolini (Mussolini's Last Five Seconds)* claims to have been an eyewitness to the killing of Il Duce and Claretta Petacci, placing the event on the morning of April 28. On the other hand, the court heard testimony from former partisan Ferrerò Vaisecchi, mayor of Tremezzina at the time of the events, who was not an eyewitness to the event. He reported that he learned of Mussolini's killing from "Captain Neri" (Luigi Canali) the following day, April 29. Therefore, he was not an eyewitness. We remind readers that "Captain Neri" was killed by partisans of the Garibaldi Formations seven days later. During his testimony, the witness Vaisecchi also stated that he had written a memoir about those historical events, but that he did not intend to make it

public. The *Corriere della Sera,* reporting on the verdict, ran the headline: *"Mussolini's death? According to the judge, it happened at 4:20 p.m."*

After the final ruling, Professor Massimo De Leonardis, professor of History of International Relations at the Catholic University of Milan and author of numerous essays on Anglo-Italian relations during World War II, published a commentary on the ruling in the magazine *Nuova Storia Contemporanea*. Here are some excerpts:

"The Milan Court of Appeal (First Criminal Section, composed of Dr. Mario Corbetta, president, Dr. E. Gisolia, and Dr. Silvana Arbia, councilors) justified the conviction for defamation of journalist and historian Luciano Garibaldi, who, in an article written for the weekly magazine *Noi* in 1994, had described the witness to the death of Benito Mussolini and Claretta Petacci as false - with reasoning that could be described as convenient rather than specious. The sentence was handed down last summer and the grounds for it

made public within the time frame established by the procedure. It is undoubtedly instructive for those professionally involved in historical research to read what the judges wrote almost as a preamble to their conviction.

"Even before reaching a conclusion on the responsibility of the defendants [together with Garibaldi, the editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine was also convicted] for the crimes attributed to them," the judges wrote on page 1 of the sentence, "it should be pointed out, without any possibility of misunderstanding, that the present trial does not concern the determination of the precise time at which, Mussolini and Petacci were killed on April 28, 1945, and that, therefore, it is pointless to expect this decision to provide any argument for or against either of the two opposing theories in the historiographical debate, as summarized in the grounds for appeal: 'The first, the official one, which has been passed down to the present day, indicates 4:30 p.m. on April 28, 1945, as the time of the shooting that took place in front of the gate of Villa Belmonte, in Giulino di Mezzegra; the second, unofficial version, based on research carried out by renowned historians, places the death of Il Duce and Petacci during the morning of that same day, in the De Maria house (or just outside it), where the two prisoners had been taken by the partisans the night before'.

This reasoning effectively invalidates the premise on which Luciano Garibaldi based his work. Garibaldi is the author of well-known books on contemporary history, such as *Mussolini e il Professore (Mussolini and the Professor)*, 1983, *Edgardo Sogno, l'altro italiano (Edgardo Sogno, the Other Italian),* 1992, *Le soldatesse di Mussolini (Mussolini's Female Soldiers)*, 1985, *La guerra (non è) perduta (The War Is Not Lost),* 1998 - to argue that the death certificate of Mussolini and Petacci was a forgery, as the two had been killed in the morning, not in the afternoon of that day. [...] But beyond this, there seems to be a key element that shows that Luciano Garibaldi had no intention of personally defaming the witness to that death certificate, which he claimed was false.

The indictment erroneously states that Luciano Garibaldi offended the memory of the deceased witness by stating, among other things, that the latter... "had told lies and falsehoods, collaborating in the drafting of false documents to make fun of all Italians, in a murky story in which everything is false, including death certificates, just one of the thousand lies with which he, like the others, wanted to cover up Mussolini's end."

Well, this sentence was invented out of thin air and reported, it is not known how, in the indictment. The exact sentence written by Luciano Garibaldi was as follows: "Now we finally know who the man was who took it upon himself to declare the death of the Duce and his mistress, and to set it at 4:20 p.m. on April 28, which for decades now no one has believed. Was he a doctor? No. A passerby? We don't know. What did he see? He doesn't say. Did he see 'Colonel Valerio' open fire on the two condemned men? Or did he see some individuals dressed as partisans pull up two corpses? Mystery. Lies. Falsehoods. Documents written for those who want to be fooled: namely, the Italians, the Italian people."

Despite the above, the judiciary has heavily condemned a historian (a $2.5 million fine, $60 million in damages to the civil parties, reimbursement of legal costs, and finally 'public shaming', i.e., publication of

the sentence at his own expense in *Corriere della Sera,* Italy's leading daily newspaper) without first ascertaining how the events unfolded, solemnly affirming that the judiciary is not in the least interested in how the events actually unfolded.

A curious circumstance: Luciano Garibaldi is also known for his clear and long-standing hostility towards what Renzo De Felice called the communist "vulgate." A cynic would conclude that the aim was to teach a lesson to a non-aligned historian. But this is certainly not the case.

THE 'SOILED RESISTANCE'

Below are the most interesting passages from Luciano Garibaldi's interview with Urbano Lazzaro, published in *II Borghese* on August 7, 1997, entitled *The Resistance sullied by the communists:*

"...An honest interview with one of the last great living protagonists of the Resistance, Urbano Lazzaro, nom de guerre "Bill," former political deputy commissioner of the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade, the man who, in the early afternoon of Friday, April 27, 1945, discovered Benito Mussolini in Dongo on a German anti-aircraft truck (German anti-aircraft artillery) in Dongo, disguised as a German soldier, trying to escape capture, and declared him under arrest 'in the name of the King and the Italian people'.

I meet "Bill" in Vercelli, where he is spending his summer vacation with his wife. "Bill" is 73 years old, was born in Vicenza, and has lived for many years in São Paulo, Brazil, where his three daughters were born, one of whom is now a magistrate of the Brazilian Republic and another a respected researcher and scientist at the University of São Paulo. However, he has retained his Italian citizenship after traveling halfway around the world as a technician for Snam Progetti, a specialist in the construction of oil refineries, and every year he comes with his wife to spend her holidays in her home country. The events in which he was involved 52 years ago left an indelible mark on his life, so much so that he has dedicated three books to them

- *Il compagno Bili, Dongo, mezzo secolo di menzogne (Comrade Bili, Dongo, half a century of lies)* and *L'oro di Dongo (The gold of Dongo)* - published in Italy, the first by Sei and the other two by Mondadori.

My meeting with 'Bill' has a self-interested motive: I intend to ask him to testify at the trial I will face in February next year before the Court of Milan, accused of having claimed that the communists told nothing but lies about Mussolini's death. (I have been sued for defamation by the children of an employee who signed Benito Mussolini's death certificate, placing it at an impossible time, 4:20 p.m. on April 28, 1945, a death certificate which I claimed, in my historical reconstruction, could not be trusted).

"Bill," frank and loyal, dispels any illusions I may have: "Please don't make me come to Italy in February, the month when I enjoy the Brazilian sun. But if you want to know from me whether the communists told the truth or lied about the events in Dongo and the end of Benito Mussolini, I will answer without hesitation that they lied, shamelessly lied, as they have always lied."

I confess: I am stunned. Such a judgment is even harsher than those I have often expressed in my history books and articles. But Urbano Lazzaro does not mince his words: "They lied and they lie, starting with the identification of the protagonist of the Dongo massacre, the famous 'Colonel Valerio' of the CVL, the Volunteer Corps of Freedom, sent from Milan to 'execute' Mussolini and the members of the RSI government."

- Why do they lie?

Lazzaro: "Because 'Valerio' was not Walter Audisio, as has been taught for generations to Italian schoolchildren, but Luigi Longo, commander-in-chief of the

Garibaldi Brigades and, at that time, number two in the PCI after Paimiro Togliatti. In ordering the executions in Dongo, he did not carry out a legitimate order from the government of His Majesty the Lieutenant, but an internal directive from the PCI and therefore from the Soviet Red Army, of which the

PCI was the *longa manus* in Italy."

- Do you realize the gravity of what you are saying?
Lazzaro: "Perfectly. So much so that I tried to stop Longo, or 'Colonel Valerio,' as soon as I realized that, like an archangel of death, he was about to shoot the guilty and the innocent, checking them off with repulsive coldness on the list of prisoners that my men and I had captured in the fleeing German column."

- And how could you have stopped him, given that he had arrived from Milan with an entire firing squad?
Lazzaro: "Ah, it would have been very easy. All I had to do was call on my 'Garibaldini' from Domaso, whom I rushed to call on my motorcycle as soon as I realized that Longo intended to kill the prisoners. I was a soldier, a finance police officer to be precise, and for me, for my morals, prisoners were sacred. As required by the Hague Convention. Only the Nazis killed hostages and prisoners without trial."

- Why weren't you able to prevent the massacre?
Lazzaro: "Because, unfortunately, I arrived too late. When I arrived at the gates of Dongo from Domaso, crossing Gravedona at the head of my men, the tragedy had already taken place and the truck, loaded with the bodies of those who had been shot, had already left for Milan, where it would arrive in Piazzale Loreto after loading the bodies of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci, who had been murdered that morning, in Giulino di Mezzegra."

So in the morning, not "at 4:20 p.m.," as the Resistance "vulgate" states, according to which the Duce was put up against a wall and shot, with greater or lesser solemnity, "in the name of the Italian people."
Lazzaro: "Listen, I wasn't in Giulino di Mezzegra, so I have to be satisfied with what my men who were there or who collected the testimonies of those present told me afterwards. The fact is that the communists have always lied about the events in Giulino and Dongo."

- Lazzaro, why did you end up in the Resistance?
Lazzaro: "Because you only swear once."

- Explain yourself better.
Lazzaro: "When Mussolini was freed from Gran Sasso and established the Italian Social Republic, our commander gathered us together and told us that we had to swear allegiance to the new government. All the finance police were lined up in the square, ready to swear, including Colonel Malgeri, who then, on April 25, handed over his weapons and baggage to the partisans. I was the only one who refused to swear."

- Why?
Lazzaro: "Because I had already sworn allegiance once. To the King."

- Were you a monarchist?
Lazzaro: "No. I was simply a soldier, a man. Who has to reckon with his own conscience."

- What happened?
Lazzaro: "I had to flee to Switzerland to avoid being arrested. From there, I returned to fight against the Germans and their fascist allies. And so it went until that fateful April 27,

when we blocked the German column fleeing towards Switzerland in Dongo."

- Listen, Lazzaro, did you ever have any dealings with the communists?
Lazzaro: "Yes, they tried to kill me at least seven times. But in those days it wasn't so easy. I was armed too. And quite well. One day in 1946, Togliatti came to Como for a rally. They wanted the flag of the 52nd to be there too. I opposed it: 'It didn't work for De Gasperi, it didn't work for Nenni, it won't work for Togliatti either'. Then, at the rally, Togliatti said to me: 'Ah, you're the famous Bill, the one who caught Mussolini. You see, if you had joined us, today you would be a member of Parliament, sitting next to me'.

- And instead?
Lazzaro: "For four years I couldn't find work, until I moved to my wife's village, near Vercelli, where they gave me a job as a laborer. Then, after studying to become a petroleum technician, I managed to get hired by Snam and emigrated."

- What is your final opinion of the Resistance?
Lazzaro: "An exciting page in Italian history. It's a shame that the communists sullied it with their thirst for blood."

THE ENGLISH TRAIL
SEEN FROM DARK SHOPS

The method used by the nomenklatura of the Italian Communist Party was the canonical one of *disinfarmatsiya,* in Russian, the planned and systematic use of disinformation. Both for the *great robbery* perpetrated in Dongo and for the bumpy course of the multi-year correspondence between Churchill and Mussolini. Luciano Garibaldi, with this ten-part journalistic investigation and his deductive reasoning, offers a substantial contribution. Above all, it brings to the fore the 'English trail', which is in fact the most significant of the implications of tampering, intrigue, manipulation, and enigmas surrounding the overall predatory and murderous activity that took place around April 27, 1945. These events are memorable in themselves for the multiplicity of political sites they involve (partisan bands, secret services, military units, and, above all, two eminent historical figures, one English and the other Italian), for the hitherto unsatisfied attraction they arouse in journalism and historiography of the recent past, still riddled with distortions, clumsy moralizing, cover-ups, and self-serving repressions.

The entire *Vhistoria aurea* is marked by the multifaceted communist action of swift and rapid appropriation, shrewd management of the common and military misdeed, and unscrupulous removal of testimonies and documents of high international value. This is not just the squalid but bloody affair between *vo-leurs vole's:* such were in fact the leaders of the Italian Social Republic and the six officers of the Kriegsmarine who had scattered

the supplies department in Limbiate, near Milan. Associated with them, in opposition and contrast, the various Italian communist partisans carried out the first and largest fraud against the national treasury, to which all the funds were traceable. These include the poorly collected private embezzlements of the unfortunate Petacci family.

Let us summarize the facts in their raw essence.

Benito Mussolini's death sentence was promulgated by the Comintern, which also took on the task of executing it. It was Mario Correnti, alias Ercoli, born Paimiro Togliatti, who officially announced it on Radio Milano-Libertà, which broadcast from Moscow. This took place on January 4, 1944.

This was well before the morning of April 25, 1945, when the CLNAI (National Liberation Committee of Northern Italy) issued the three fundamental decrees that sealed its legislative work. Article I of the first decree reads: "Members of the fascist government and fascist leaders shall be punished with the death penalty and, in less serious cases, with life imprisonment." The Comintern had wisely (!) foreseen and anticipated this. Both had excluded Mrs. Petacci from punishment, whose involvement had been mainly sentimental, an overwhelming human passion for Mussolini.

The actual execution was decided solely by the Italian Communist apparatus, whose main and most influential figures at that fateful juncture were Luigi Longo, Pietro Secchia, and Emilio Sereni, an intellectual strongly motivated by Stalinism, who had been released from long periods of detention in Italy, France, and the Soviet Union itself because he had been investigated by the NKVD and was a fighter in the maquis. The latter was assigned to the Insurrectional Committee of the city of Milan at the disposal of the National Liberation Committee (CLN), which also coordinated and influenced partisan actions outside the province, in the Valli d'Os

Sola, the Sesia valley, the Biella area, the Canavese area, the Lanzo valleys, the western Piedmont valleys, the Langhe and Monferrato areas, the Oltrepò Pavese area, and the VT Ligurian area.

On April 24, they led the assault of the 3rd Garibaldi Brigade (Gap) on the barracks of the Republican National Guard (Gnr) in Niguarda. Above all, they entrusted the actual shooting of Mussolini to military officer Aldo Lampredi, a member of the Ceka militia. He was a trusted man of the Komintern leadership, a former fighter in the International Brigades in Spain under Red Army General Alexandr Orlov, aka Lew Feldbin. He took on the pseudonym 'Guido' for the occasion. When, on March 22, 1947, the party secretariat decided to reveal the name of the person who carried out Mussolini's execution, it committed a deliberate falsehood. "Yes, I, accountant Walter Audisio, am 'Colonel Valerio'. I personally shot Mussolini," he declared in an interview with journalist John Pasetti, Rome correspondent for Radio Lausanne, on March 3, 1947. The disinformation initiative had been meticulously agreed upon with the Italian and Soviet leadership. Lampredi's identity was carefully concealed, as the Comintern was accustomed to doing for the men of the 'wet services', i.e. those involved in bloodshed. The overall operation was entrusted, on the basis of the clear separation

between politics and military affairs, to 'Guglielmo', the plumber Dante Gorreri, federal secretary of Como. In 1921, as provincial secretary of the Communist Youth Federation of Parma, he had actively participated in the 'Battle of Oltre Torrente' against Italo Balbo's fascist squads, commanded by the communist deputy Guido Picelli. 'Guglielmo', who had served several years in prison and confinement for this and other reasons, where he lost his wife and two children to illness, was the exact counterpart in terms of loyalty and practicality, essential requirements together with Moscow-style ideological rigor, of
Aldo Lampredi. Guglielmo was responsible for the complex task of rebuilding after Dongo.
He first directed the formal collection of valuables found in the motorcade commanded by Lieutenant Willy Flamminger of the Flak (Luftwaffe anti-aircraft surveillance), in which Mussolini had hidden himself. The amount subsequently calculated by John Kobler, an agent of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA, and Lieutenant Edmund Palmieri, an officer of the Allied Commission in Italy, came to 189,657,000,000 lire in 1949. Journalistic estimates based on further research quantified the total amount at 600 billion lire at the time.
On April 28, 1945, in Dongo, at the headquarters of the partisan brigade located in the town hall, the official inventory was carried out at the behest and by order of "Guglielmo." The brigade command, composed of Commander 'Pedro', Commissioner 'Pietro', Chief of Staff 'Neri', Deputy Commissioner 'Bill', the War Commissioner of the Como area, and with the virtual but imperative presence of 'Guglielmo', decided 'to entrust the aforementioned valuables to the Communist Federation of Como, the only body that took an interest in, helped, and valued the always great and often heroic efforts of the Garibaldini, in execution of the peripheral function of the Pei."
"Guglielmo" did not idle. Before being brought to trial on the complaint of the Public Prosecutor's Office of Como on September 2, 1946, he addressed the fundamental question of the handling and use of the gold from Dongo: to transfer it to a safe place in Switzerland; to monetize the accumulation of gold and silver in European currency and securities. His anti-fascist life had been marked by daring activities and, in particular, by an enigmatic "failed execution" by the fascists. Gorreri had
had been captured by a unit of the X Mas, but was released in exchange for an undisclosed transfer of expertise. He had in fact become an expert in the export and trafficking of capital. During his exile in Switzerland after his narrow escape from execution, he had enriched his professional expertise not in the field of hydraulics, but in the more lucrative field of finance. From Loversiano di Mendrisiotto, near Bellinzona, he had built up a network of contacts, informants, and "spalloni," or money smugglers. Rich in this experience, he had acquired a skill that stimulated him. He recalled that in Parma, in 1922, he had met a brilliant and skilled character whose life and actions were reckless, ideally inspired, and politically, that is, "communist," lived with ardor. He had been a "Fiumano" with D'Annunzio. His name was Renato Cigarini, and he was a confident and successful lawyer, practicing at the Sacra Rota. He had known and frequented Gramsci and participated in the struggles in Parma during which communist women used to throw boiling oil at fascist attackers from the rooftops.
I had the opportunity to meet him with a touch of curiosity and interest and some youthful admiration, first in Rome, then in Milan at his home in Via Agostino Bertani, in the Sempione area. There, the fiercely anti-fascist lawyer lived with a woman from Mussolini's close family.
I was struck, in the course of events that I remember clearly, by a triangulation he carried out every two weeks between 1948 and 1950. He would arrive at the Botteghe Oscure, known to the partisan guard service, skip the first floor of the offices, go up to the fourth floor where Pietro Secchia, former leader of the military formations in the North, had his office, go down to the third floor where the party administrator, Egisto Cappellini, was, and then come to my room on the second floor, separated from Togliatti's office by a glass door. After the
meeting, which was usually lengthy and documented with many papers and calculations, he would invite me to Trastevere, usually to the Piperno restaurant in Monte Cenci, which was a godsend for my forced sobriety as a Communist official. It was a relaxing break that proved not entirely useless for me.
Cigarini told me about D'Annunzio's enterprise in Fiume, in which he had participated together with Alceste De Ambris, a socialist trade unionist who had become D'Annunzio's private secretary. He had been part of the Commander's personal guard. He recalled and recited with emphasis: "O old Italy, keep your old Cagoia," echoing the fierce epithet hurled by D'Annunzio against Francesco Saverio Nitti, head of the government of "this little Italy that accepts the diktat of the great powers against our six hundred thousand dead in the war." Cigarini added that he shared the conclusion of D'Annunzio,

who had been visited in Fiume by the First People's Commissar of the Soviet Union, Georgij Vasilevic Cicerin. "We are from another homeland and we believe in heroes." As he spoke to me, I observed him: he was in his fifties, handsome, with slightly graying hair, thick eyebrows, and piercing gray eyes. He looked like an American movie actor capable of playing risky roles without stunt doubles, perhaps as a pilot, as he had been with the hero Baracca.

I learned during those days that he was the indispensable keystone who had transformed Dongo's gold into hard Italian currency with skill and international technical expertise. I explained his pertinent geometric triangulation: Secchia, Cappellini, Togliatti. Without him and his industrious dedication, it would not have been possible to pay the Marchini builders for the Botteghe Oscure headquarters, which became the property of the Pei, as well as other generous expenditures for the purchase of printing machines for *VUnità* in Milan.

In those fiery post-Liberation years, news of bloodshed continued to arrive from the north, but the Botteghe Oscure environment operated a shrewd process of selection, domestication, and removal so that information about the cruel executions linked to the Dongo operation was confused and indecipherable. Moreover, the other national parties that made up the Liberation Committee of Upper Italy were mostly unmotivated and unable to denounce the facts of the colossal communist appropriation: it was as if an unwritten pact of mutual reticence, of generalized and agreed opportunism, had muted the whole affair.

The judiciary had begun its laborious, complex, and arduous judicial process. The investigations dragged on in a fog of local and central findings. On September 2, 1946, the preliminary investigation section of the Milan Court of Appeal, set in motion by the Como Public Prosecutor's Office, indicted Dante Gorreri, code-named 'Guglielmo', and other partisan commanders following a rigorous investigation by a senior Italian public security official stationed in Rome, Inspector General Ciro Verdiani. It was the first act in a republican history, the first in chronological order, exemplary for its multiple vices and connivances, destined to shine for many decades as an explicit and calculated political-judicial maneuver. It refers to proven 'embezzlement, violence and consequent murders' and rejects the self-serving legend that the gold and documents were 'war booty'.

The main protagonist, 'the plumber' Gorreri, along with the other perpetrators, both party members and non-party members, were all put on trial. Gorreri was detained in San Vittore prison in Milan from February 15, 1949, with the sentence confirmed on October 3 of the same year by the Milan Court of Appeal, and was released upon his election to Parliament. Gorreri was, in fact, elected in

college of Parma, Modena, Piacenza, and Reggio Emilia with ten thousand votes of preference over the fifty thousand that went to the "Catholic" Nilde Jotti. He managed to be acquitted of the charges, not because he had validly demonstrated his innocence in the subsequent atrocities, but because he was granted a pardon obtained by the Minister of Justice Togliatti, who did not argue, but acted. The crimes charged were 'murder', 'concealment of a corpse', 'embezzlement', 'misappropriation' and 'theft', depending on whether the defendant was a public official or a private citizen. The Court of Cassation glossed over the fact that the war in Italy had ended on May 2, 1945, and that the order given to the partisans by the national government had begun to take effect after June 6.

This judicial and political hijacking, not only in Italy, lasted exactly twenty-seven years. It led to two amnesty laws, including five preliminary rulings with reasoned referrals for trial, as many appeals, transfers of venues due to legitimate suspicion and conflicts of jurisdiction. It resulted in fifty-six indictments and five dismissals. It influenced the suicide of a lay judge (Silvio Andreghetti), who was never replaced. It led to the dismissal of a military prosecutor and the suspension of all proceedings. He wandered, bordering on a cover-up, in the courtrooms of Como, Milan, Rome, and Padua. He convicted nine defendants of murder, including the main suspects, based on the testimony and statements of those who had heard and seen, occupying several hundred public hearings. Files piled up, exceeding three meters in height when stacked on top of each other. Each copy of the file cost over a million lire, some as much as a million and a half. Eight debates were held in Parliament, based on motions and questions with oral and written answers. It resulted in the application of two amnesty sentences.

Communist, Christian Democrat, Liberal, and Action Party prime ministers and ministers.

Togliatti alone was able to issue a sensational key statement (reported in the minutes of the hearing of April 9, 1957, of the Court of Padua) which, quoting *L'Unità* of April 29, 1945, read: "The circumstance that Mussolini's column was loaded with Italian and foreign currency is an invention."

Togliatti was not only alluding to *the historia aurea*. With this investigation, Luciano Garibaldi provokes a necessary

reinterpretation of the whole story, adding a protagonist who has been undeservedly excluded and maliciously covered up: the British secret services. It is indeed very significant and suspicious that the official narratives make little reference to them and mention them only superficially.

Luigi Carissimi Priori, a member of the ORI, a non-communist Italian resistance organization, who at the time was a distinguished member of the investigative office of the Como police headquarters, linked to the Prime Minister, Ferruccio Parri, also recently mentioned the incontrovertible existence of material exchanged between a very high-ranking British personality and the Duce of Fascism. This is the correspondence between Winston Spencer Churchill and Benito Mussolini, which has so far been impossible to find, and which was tracked down by several officers parachuted into northern Italy by the British Army near Como, whose presence was accurately reported by all witnesses to the events connected with the events in Dongo.

The fact that Americans were also involved was revealed to Togliatti by Samuel Rebur and Harold Caccia, deputy political advisers at Allied headquarters, who visited him in Salerno, in his office at the prefecture during the government of Marshal Badoglio. Togliatti called the two high-ranking figures 'the Cat and the Fox' in his succinct 'Diary'
of 1944-1945, borrowing from the anthropomorphism of Collodi's Pinocchio, of which he was a fervent exegete, a definition mixed with sarcasm and condescension. The fact that Americans were also involved added spice to the whole affair, as it was a matter that closely concerned the British, i.e., the closest allies on paper.

There is some debate as to whether this correspondence contains letters written after the creation of the Social Republic of Salò. In a recent interview with Fernando Mezzetti, a journalist who, in 1979, was one of the first to publish, co-authored with Gianfranco Bianchi, an interesting investigation into "The Epilogue of April '45," Carissimi Priori denies that the papers concerned the Salò Government. The day after Dongo, Carissimi Priori approached a photo technician from the municipality of Como, Carlo Ballarate, accompanied by a journalist who spoke broken Italian with an Anglo-Saxon accent. He asked him to immediately and in his presence, from start to finish, photolithograph a series of sixty-two letters, all autographed. Ballarate glimpsed the dates: 1936 for the first, June 1940 for the last. He also saw the very distinctive signatures: Mussolini and W. S. C.

Now, however, Garibaldi, referring to documentation long jealously guarded by the commander of the SS in Italy, General Karl Wolff, and to a whole series of relevant testimonies, authoritatively accredits the existence of further, much more compromising contacts between Churchill and Mussolini in 1944 and, perhaps, in the early months of 1945.

One thing is certain. These contacts and documents, in any case, as protagonists and witnesses, converge on another Italian Comintern leader, member of the Insurrectional Committee, Emilio Sereni. He did not fail to grasp the importance and usefulness of the 'parallel treasure' constituted by the documents he found in the personal luggage of the truck following the head of the fascist government.

. The fascist Minister of National Education, the esteemed Carlo Alberto Biggini, who was a former student of Guido De Ruggiero and Benedetto Croce and had been a member of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Social Republic since 1943, must also have had direct knowledge of this. He had a close relationship with Mussolini and was informed of the fascist leader's most secret thoughts and hopes regarding politics.

As far as Sereni was concerned, he received the interesting news through confidential channels and did not let the initiative slip away. Together with Count Pier Maria Annoni di Gussola, government commissioner for the former Ministry of the Interior of the defunct Italian Social Republic, he had been tasked with 'the recovery, concentration, and custody, pending delivery to the government, of valuables, precious items, and works of art seized in northern Italy from fascist or Nazi leaders, speculators, etc., in any case pertaining to the state'. This is documented by Mezzetti and Bianchi on page 216 of the aforementioned book. There is no doubt that Sereni thought of his boss, Togliatti, as the final recipient of the papers rather than the government, De Gasperi. It is doubtful whether Count Annoni, secretary at the time of the Como police chief, Grassi, personally took care of getting the correspondence to Italian President De Gasperi. Sereni, much more likely, did not discard the idea of his party mission that the papers should reach his internationalist side.

"If you talk, you'll come to a bad end," whispered "Guglielmo" (Gorreri) in Ballarate, graciously taking back the photocopied originals.

Sereni took those papers with Gorreri to Milan and handed them over to Secchia. Ugo Arcuno, a journalist *for L'Unità's* Milan edition, was tasked with writing about them due to his reliability and expertise. Ercoli-Togliatti, who was immediately informed, took every decision upon himself. He read the material. It seems to me personally that Togliatti,

faithful to Cominternist habits regarding confidential matters, so that they remain so, did not make copies and did not immediately hand the letters over to anyone. He waited for the right moment to make them count, appropriately and in person, that is, outside of Stalin's reach.
which confidential matters, in order to remain so, are not copied, did not immediately hand over the letters to anyone. He waited for the right moment to make them count, appropriately and in person, that is, outside of Stalin's sphere of influence, with the person directly concerned. This happened in 1946.
Churchill had been defeated in the first post-war elections in July 1945. All the more reason for him to be interested in recovering that correspondence. Having become the leader of the global anti-Soviet camp with his speech at Fulton University in 1946, he organized a visit to Italy for the ostensible purpose of relaxing and sightseeing. As a simple member of the British Parliament, he had more room for maneuver than as prime minister and was able to more easily follow not only the trail of the compromising correspondence, but also all the copies that had presumably been made of it. Churchill easily learned that a copy or the original itself had fallen into the hands of "Guglielmo" and from him traced it back to the head of the PCI.
On December 10, 1945, Togliatti had become Minister of Justice in the first De Gasperi Cabinet. The British leader found an easy opportunity to meet with him. He did so at the British Embassy in Rome, behind Porta Pia, where the Italian minister was invited.
I learned of the invitation myself and was particularly surprised that Togliatti went there with full and absolute awareness of the unusual reason for the meeting. The Churchill Archive in London shows that the British politician traveled to Lake Garda in 1946. The author of this article is in possession of a fax from the British Embassy in Rome dated February 10, 2000, which reports in detail on Churchill's travels. The document is signed by Ann Ashford of the Press and Information Section, who states that she obtained information from London, from the aforementioned Churchill Archive and, on its behalf, from the authorized official,
Mr. Gavin. The same fax is the source of Churchill's trips in July 1945, 1949-51, and 1955, as well as Lady Clementine's trips to Italy. It is also known that Churchill attended the inauguration of the new headquarters of the Embassy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, at Via XX Settembre 80/A, and that this was an opportunity to reaffirm contacts and assurances with the Italian communist leader.
I was struck at the time by a recurring circumstance. On each visit after those in 1946, Churchill would arrange, with a sort of amiable but actually self-interested coquetry, to be photographed with Togliatti, his much-feared international enemy, standing next to him: as if to confirm to those inside and outside the Conservative Party who had anxious memories of the correspondence with Mussolini that the bomb had now been identified, located, and defused in a short time. It had reached one of thetwo senders. The most dangerous and potential user of that correspondence, fordenigrating purposes, Ercoli-Togliatti, the former and still powerful secretary of the Comintern, had become an autonomous andhabitual visitor to the British embassy, with which he maintained close contacts and was very attentive to invitations.
The post-communists are now aware of this truth. Roberto Fistorazzi, writing in the January-February 2002 issue of the magazine *Nuova Storia contemporanea,* reports with great accuracy on the contacts and insistence of the national leaders in 1997 on the Como circle of veterans of the War of Liberation. The international importance of the correspondence, 'confiscated by the Italian Communist Party in May 1945', is clearly still relevant. The question of why those who institutionally preserve the original correspondence or their copies have remained silent until now is still pressing. On February 10, 2000*, the UPIT* announced that "the entire photographic archive of Ugo Arcuilo," the journalist who was first commissioned to investigate
verify them, 'had been seized by the police'. A bureaucratic, fragile, insubstantial statement that does not cancel out the case. The 'English trail', obviously still together with the others, is still on the front page of the unwritten minutes of a century 'of murderous ideas'.

Massimo Caprara